

Variations on a Self

Alan Bennett's works in autobiographical, dramaturgical and narratological interpretations

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Dedication

To my grandmothers

Elise Heinecke-Stegen (1905 – 2002)

Mary Hill McKechnie (1914 – 1993)

and
to my parents

Antje and Gordon McKechnie.

ABSTRACT

Alan Bennett has been a fixture in British cultural life since 1960. His work as a writer for a variety of media is accessible to a wide audience through a public persona, combining the sharpness of an Oxford wit and the unthreatening familiarity of a national treasure. Bennett's writing is identifiably English in character, embracing notions of embarrassment, understatement and self-deprecation, and often featuring provincial characters and settings. His literary preference for marginalised characters creates seemingly banal lives, which then reveal unexpectedly complex worlds. While much of this work draws on the writer's early life in the North of England, it also incorporates more universal issues and concerns.

Despite his popularity, Bennett has received relatively little critical attention. On the occasions when he is subjected to the critical gaze, he is often presented as a reactionary playwright who glorifies the past, or is seen within the framework of northern homeliness.

This thesis offers readings of Alan Bennett's works across a number of different media, such as stage, television, film, prose fiction and journalism. Its interdisciplinary approach suggests lines of investigation from the subject areas of English Literature, Theatre, Film and Television studies, as well as Cultural Studies and Social Psychology. The thesis also provides an overview of long-term trajectories and chronologies in Bennett's oeuvre, such as the increase of autobiographical writing and the development of the self as performance, termed 'the writer in disguise' by Bennett. It also discusses the tension that is created between Bennett's conflicting urges of discussing his self and maintaining his privacy. He tells the biographically interested audience the story of his 'life', but edits it through multiple versions to avoid committing himself to any single account. It is suggested that Bennett uses his ability to negotiate genre and pitch to underline his permanent state of being in two minds. Bennett is located as an author who has gradually extricated himself from being subject to rules of genre or literary convention. The three main theoretical approaches applied in this thesis – autobiography, dramaturgy and narratology – are seen as suitable vehicles for the interpretation of Bennett's evolving performance of self in his works.

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List of Abbreviations

<i>Clothes</i>	<i>The Clothes They Stood Up in</i>
<i>CTH</i>	<i>The Complete Talking Heads</i>
<i>Englishman</i>	<i>An Englishman Abroad</i>
<i>Father!</i>	<i>Father! Father! Burning Bright!</i>
<i>Function</i>	<i>A Private Function</i>
<i>Kafka</i>	<i>Kafka's Dick</i>
<i>Laying on</i>	<i>The Laying on of Hands</i>
<i>George III</i>	<i>The Madness of George III</i>
<i>King George</i>	<i>The Madness of King George</i>
<i>Objects</i>	<i>Objects of Affection</i>
<i>Poetry</i>	<i>Poetry in Motion</i>
<i>Question</i>	<i>A Question of Attribution</i>
<i>Spies</i>	<i>Single Spies</i>
<i>TH I</i>	<i>Talking Heads I</i>
<i>TH II</i>	<i>Talking Heads II</i>
<i>Tales</i>	<i>Telling Tales</i>
<i>Van</i>	<i>The Lady in the Van</i>
<i>Virginia Woolf</i>	<i>Me, I'm Afraid of Virginia Woolf</i>
<i>WH</i>	<i>Writing Home</i>
<i>Writer</i>	<i>The Writer in Disguise</i>
<i>Willows</i>	<i>The Wind in the Willows</i>

1) Introduction

Alan Bennett is one of the most popular contemporary British dramatists. Born in Leeds in 1934 as the son of a violin-playing butcher, he claims to have spent a typically provincial, uneventful childhood. A scholarship boy, he received Russian language training during his National Service, possibly accounting for an enduring interest in the concepts of espionage and treachery. Bennett then read mediaeval history at Oxford, and seemed destined for a career as a junior don. However, a growing interest in writing and performing satirical sketches lead, in 1960, to his involvement in *Beyond the Fringe*, considered a defining moment for satire. The revue launched Bennett as a public persona alongside his collaborators, Peter Cook, Jonathan Miller and Dudley Moore. In his subsequent career, Bennett has written and performed in a variety of genres and formats, including stage and television drama, film and print media. Although Bennett is uneasy about his celebrity status, he has become what is frequently termed a ‘national treasure’.

Bennett is a modern writer who is neither modernist nor overtly post-modernist. As my thesis will demonstrate, his recent work can increasingly be associated with post-modern culture and stylistic experiments. Part of this post-modern awareness is characterised by Bennett’s manifestations of self and the way in which his work explores the concept of multiple selves. Bennett himself has become increasingly introspective, turning himself into the central subject of his writing. Most of all, perhaps, he is associated with a peculiarly English character and, as a result, he has become something of a cultural icon. Yet Bennett’s work has been afforded relatively little substantial critical attention.

My study examines formal innovation in the works of Alan Bennett across a range of media and genres, and the place of autobiography and multiple selves in his writings. The study is motivated in part by the critical neglect of Bennett’s work and his consequently problematic position within the literary canon. Alan Bennett’s work is generally not

included in critical or theoretical studies of contemporary British drama or television drama, his two main areas of production (Innes 1992, Creeber 2001, Caughie 1998 et al, for example). This absence stands in contrast to the unquestionable public acclaim that has greeted his work, both in viewing and sales figures, and also by the popular attributes such as ‘everyone’s favourite Yorkshireman’ that are frequently associated with the author. On the occasions when he is subjected to the critical gaze, he is often presented as a reactionary playwright who glorifies the past,¹ and is seen within a framework of northern homeliness. The imbalance between his popularity with his audience and critical ‘ennui’ forms one of the major areas of investigation in this thesis.

The thesis draws on original interview material with a number of Bennett’s key collaborators, but also on all existing interviews with the author. Bennett himself has never wanted to collaborate with academics, journalists or authors on the subject of his writing, and stopped giving interviews in 1992. Consequently, my approach to him was politely rebuffed:

I always say to people who are studying my stuff that it’s best to treat me as a dead author and so not available for comment. Make it up – no-one will know.²

Bennett resists engagement with the public beyond the material he himself generates. His work and persona thus offer a profound contradiction: while the public might think they know more of him than about almost any other contemporary playwright, Bennett insists that he cannot talk about his works, or engage with the public outside the boundaries of his writing. Although initially it might have seemed to be a disadvantage not to have input and commentary from a living author, the question of his resistance to questioning and his wish to be treated ‘as a dead author’ has become one of the central strands of academic enquiry in this thesis.

¹ See, for example, Bull 1994:10-11.

² Alan Bennett, Letter to K. McKechnie Oct. 1995.

The methodology is based on a chronological survey of trajectories in Bennett's writing. This creates separate chronologies, as Bennett's work undergoes different developments in different media. Although the dominant, overall perspective has its source in the theories of life writing, the thesis is not a biographical study. Rather it opens up several areas of investigation connected to literary representations of the self. A further main thematic strand of enquiry concerns the gradually increasing importance of autobiographical material in Bennett's works in tension with his reluctance to turn his private self into public property. Another strand relates to his status as a writer in relation to other writers, both past and present. Finally, the thesis focuses on the diversification of self-representation in Bennett's writing for stage and screen and the increasing unreliability of Bennett's narration of his own story.

1.1) The Argument

The individual sections of this thesis provide different notions of development within Bennett's works. These developments are often parallel to each other, but can happen relatively separately, as far as media, genre and time are concerned. One can note that developments coherent in their own area of Bennett's works are often not mirrored in works written within a different genre or medium in the same period. The increasingly simple forms employed within Bennett's television drama cannot directly be linked to developments in his stage plays, for example. Other trajectories, such as the relationship between increasing autobiography and the reliability of the author's narrative, are closely intertwined. In Chapter 4 on Forms, Genres, Themes, individual chronologies are established for Bennett's development of dramatic and other forms in different media. On stage, Bennett has never shown a particular preference for any distinctive form, producing large and small cast plays, adaptations, history plays and plays based on 'true stories'. Within television, however, we can observe two developments: one follows trends in television writing, in that it moves from the single play to the mini-series, a commercially more viable form. The other shows Bennett's increasing focus on observing and reproducing individual characters by moving towards the single voice play, most famously

Talking Heads I and II (1987 and 1998). This development can be aligned to Bennett's move backwards from his acquired playwright's voice, with which he started his career, to his original voice. Bennett also acquires distinctive voices for film, prose (diaries and fiction) and journalism. Some of these developments move towards having their own distinctive inventory of generic conventions.

'Auteurism' is a term mainly used in film and television studies,³ but there are arguments for applying the term to Bennett's work overall, simply because of his recognisability and increasing control of his product. Many of Bennett's works show considerable generic and formal innovation, often in connection with increasing simplicity. This formal reduction is paralleled by Bennett's increase in artistic control: where he initially has a consultant function within the production of his plays, he acquires such roles as director, actor, producer, and latterly Executive Producer, with the foundation of Slow Motion Films Ltd.

Another trajectory, that of the increasing dominance of autobiographical material, can be seen to interact with the construction of his popular public persona. In a parallel development, Bennett seems to focus less on the larger historical frame of his earlier works (as in the 1971 play *Getting On*, for example), and now focuses almost exclusively on his personal history, often playfully juxtaposing fact and fiction. Although he has stated that he was more suited to being a playwright rather than a historian, comparing playwriting to 'the backstairs of history' (in Preston 2001:15), he has described the struggle to be less true to 'facts', especially in works with a historical or biographical background. Bennett (in Wu 2000:95) has commented that he has gradually lost his "historical timidity" and has become more liberal towards invention in his works. The idea that Bennett has become more accustomed to 'lying' has interesting implications for his development (see below and Chapter 8).

³ Auteurism: a term used to describe a body of work that clearly demonstrates through its themes, treatments and mise-en-scene, a single authorial presence. Francois Truffaut's article in the *Cahiers du Cinema* (1954), demanding recognition of the mise-en-scene of a filmic work as at least having equal significance as its literary value is seen as the origin of the theory. See also Bechmann 1997, and the discussion of Bennett as a television auteur in Chapter 4.2.2.

Latterly in Bennett's career, one can observe the gradual breaking up of generic and formal boundaries. Forms are created to carry content and context of a work, and are 'customised' to suit Bennett's needs. Since the late 1980s, contents and media boundaries have been merging, producing forms unique to Bennett. The case study on the *Talking Heads*-monologue (Chapter 4) illustrates this point in showing how Bennett has reinvented the monologue for the stage by creating a generic composite. Ingredients from stage, television and film are amalgamated through performance conventions such as Music Hall, radio play, dramatic monologue, and are also influenced by photography. The result is a format that seems familiar, but is innovative and tailor-made to suit its author's strengths.

One of the most important (and critically neglected) phenomenon of Bennett's development as a writer is the increasing stronghold of autobiography, discussed in Chapters 5 to 8. This development is remarkable both in terms of content and of form: innovative formal and narrative solutions are smuggled in through safe and familiar content, thus often unnoticed. By this 'Trojan horse' approach, Bennett opens up new possibilities for the genre of autobiography. Although Bennett has never produced a 'straightforward' autobiography, he has delivered an abundance of material through various works, *Writing Home* (1994) in particular. Chapters 5 to 8 of this thesis thus examine the trajectory of Bennett's life as an increasingly dominant source in his works, and as his central concern as an author. His wish not to suffer the consequences of revelation has lead to a significant tension in his work: that of wanting to talk about his life, but wanting the safety, or at least the possibility, of fictionality at the same time. The four chapters introduce four main (but different) ways in which Bennett negotiates these contradicting notions within his works in different media. The tension between the urge for confession and the wish to hide from the public glare gets stronger: *The Lady in the Van* is an extraordinarily confessional text, but it also clearly states the unreliability of its narrator, Bennett himself, a doubled character in his own play. Thus, a number of Bennett's works are examined as 'case studies' in the light of different ways of bringing the self into the work.

Chapter 5, Writers and Disguises, is the first of four chapters on autobiographical trajectories and their formal expressions in Bennett's work. The validity of the belief that biography tells as much about the biographer as it does about the object of biography is examined with reference to Bennett's plays and essays about other authors. Bennett does not refer to 'Literature' as inspiration, but as intimidation. These sentiments are examined with reference to Harold Bloom's thesis of *The Anxiety Of Influence*.

Bennett seems to see biography as usurpation when he himself is the object of other authors' investigations. Does he in his biographical works on other writers therefore usurp their lives to find another means of talking about his own? The lives and sometimes the works of writers are considered as a means for Bennett's own self-discovery and evaluation. Other writers can also be vehicles for issues or ideas that concern or affect Bennett and are of public interest. Bennett includes the often stereotypical and simplistic public perception of writers' lives and works: Kafka stands for paranoia, Proust evokes cork-lined rooms, Larkin is the voice of deprivation. Bennett sometimes emphasises biographical speculation on a particular writer, often with the intended effect of unmasking the audience's preoccupation with the lives of famous people, as in his anti-biographical farce, *Kafka's Dick*. As he examines the type of fictionality that comes out of biographical 'facts', the works on other writers move further away from being straightforward biographical investigations. Bennett's manipulation and the unveiling of the relativity of the factual and fictional can become tools for showing how easily we are persuaded to consider something as 'fact' or 'truth'.

The thesis suggests in Chapter 5 that Bennett seeks out themes in other writers' work that might be related to his own recurring preoccupations: his ongoing confrontation of the ethics of using other people's lives (writing as 'the devil's work') impacts on the way he portrays Franz Kafka in *Kafka's Dick* and *The Insurance Man*, for example. Bennett recognises northern escapist notions, often associated with writers like Wells and Priestley, in characters, often trapped in a life that makes them unhappy. He also explores the notion of deprivation as a 'necessary' prerequisite to a writer's success against the examples of

these two authors, half satirically, half seriously bemoaning the fact that his own childhood was too 'humdrum' to provide him with enough material. Works like *The Insurance Man* and *102 Boulevard Haussmann* are biographical portraits that are not based on confirmed facts but construct the atmospheric qualities of writers' works, and have Kafka and Proust respectively as their protagonists. Bennett can thus be seen to pitch his own identity as a writer against the lives and works of other writers. These works consequently form part of the ongoing investigation of self, but 'in disguise', just as Bennett integrates some of his own personality traits into his characters.

Chapter 6, Bennett's Selves, is subtitled 'A Discourse of Anxiety?', as confession and anxiety are closely linked in Bennett's works. Bennett's 'gentle' formal anarchism means that he does not fit comfortably into the definitions of what constitutes autobiography. In his works until the late 1990s, one has to differentiate between direct and indirect autobiographical expressions, both unconventionally integrated and formulated. In the indirect version, Bennett hides behind similar characters, or at least characters who share one or more of his characteristics. In the more direct expression of autobiography, Bennett can also be said to be hiding, as information on his life is mainly placed in prefaces and introductions, which are formally separate from the work they are leading into. With the increasing autobiographical dominance, this balance develops in a way that both preface and the work it introduces have similar levels of 'autobiographicality' by the late 1990s.

Thus, the pattern of safe autobiography, of facts that can be renounced if necessary forms a theme in chapters 5 to 8. The autobiographical trajectory in Bennett's work emerges as a long term, relatively linear development. It ranges from virtually no autobiographical notions (in early stage works), through indirect autobiography ('the writer in disguise'), reaching an increasing proportion of 'self' in the texts. Finally, Bennett, boldly and timidly at the same time, 'exposes' his life on stage and screen, in works such as *The Lady in the Van* and *Telling Tales*. In these works, the former separation of the directly personal introduction and indirectly personal work no longer exists, although the tension between self-revelation and secrecy is still a dominant theme. Autobiography can thus be seen as a

discourse of anxiety (Schlaeger in Batchelor 1995:57), used here to describe Bennett's wish to control the ways in which his life is represented. This is summarised in the form of a 'chiasmus': the more Bennett exposes his life inside his works, the less he wants his private life to be exposed.

Chapter 7, Public Image – Private Selves, is the third chapter discussing Bennett's means of self-expression and representation. It is an examination of Bennett's journey from writer in disguise to public persona in his works. There is a natural succession from the questions about autobiographical conventions and degrees to an examination of the way he presents himself in his increasingly personal works. Bennett states that he would "rather the public had an image, and not quite fit it. That way, you're free" (Adams 2000:3). It is not possible to define the Bennett person and the persona separately, because only the persona is accessible to the public. In order to shield his privacy, Bennett has an interest in maintaining his persona, which passes as him, but works almost like a mask made from his own face. Some of his characters are also equipped with this self-knowledge, which results in their being able to manipulate their persona in their favour. Guy Burgess in Bennett's play *An Englishman Abroad* sums up the concept of persona: "If I wore a mask, it was to be exactly what I seemed." (WH:243) The less this invention seems like an invention, the more successfully will the "real" author be able to hide behind it. Bennett's persona is not a fictitious invention, but shields the real self with the creation of a literary self. He is aware of the way others perceive his behaviour and has the ability to repeat a 'performance' that is expected. Bennett is an unlikely example of the post-modern thesis of the image's dominance over the concept it represents: he shows a playfully self-conscious approach to the concept of personal identity within a cultural climate that capitalises on inventions and reinventions of the self.

Chapter 7 gives particular attention to behaviourist theories (notably by Erving Goffman and the critical school of Life as Theatre), which Bennett acknowledges as influences on his writing. The principle of behaviour as performance can be seen as relevant to texts such as *The Madness of George III*, *The Wind in the Willows*, and the documentary *Dinner at*

Noon, all written and produced between 1988 and 1992. These texts examine the difference between being and seeming and can be connected with Bennett's performances of 'seeming himself'. The Bennett persona is a construction, controlled by Bennett himself, and is suggested here to be another risk-free way of talking about himself, and utilised to control his image. Thus the persona into which Bennett was propelled and with which he is now compliant has become a strategy of both self-presentation and self-preservation. Bennett's self-fashioning is examined in this chapter, as well as characters whom he claims share his characteristics, but are not projections of his whole personality; he refers to them as 'the writer in disguise'. The central character is described as a 'void', a passive, reactionary presence which Bennett positions close to himself in prefaces or comments (see also *WH*:167). The chapter also acknowledges that the phenomenon of the Bennett persona goes far beyond Bennett's works: it is part of popular culture, and is thus discussed from a number of perspectives other than Bennett's own: critical, biographical, satirical and journalistic. The various stereotypes applied to Bennett are also examined in this context.

Finally, Chapter 8, *Masks and Doubles*, has close links with the notion of the Bennett persona as a performance of self. Bennett's application of fictionality and unreliability to autobiographical material leads to a playful approach towards factuality and 'truth'. From the established principles of the self as mask or performance, we move to the examination of reliability within Bennett's narrative. It is suggested that there is a gradual decrease in the narrators' stability and reliability in a development ranging over many years in Bennett's writing. The trajectory can be outlined in the following roughly chronological manner between the late 1970s and the late 1990s, through the following stages: in earlier works, an unreliable narrative of a character is often modified by a reliable narrator. In works such as *Talking Heads*, an unreliable narrative of a character is left to the audience to expose as unreliable through subtext or other strategic 'clues'. Finally, particularly in *The Lady in the Van*, the narrator's reliability becomes increasingly unstable, reaching a 'post modern' level of claiming the ultimate absence of reliable 'truth'. Can this therefore be seen as another device to contain the tension between Bennett wanting to expose his self in his works, and the fear of the consequences this might have?

The Lady in the Van (1999) is the text that signifies the link between autobiography and unreliability most clearly. The absence of reliable narrative and the metanarrative quality of the play point towards the hypothesis that *The Lady in the Van* represents Bennett's (reluctant) transition to post modernism. The play teasingly communicates the view that all the supposed facts are mere possibilities. It satisfies an audience that is only interested in the interface between life and art, and it confirms that Bennett, in his later career, has become determined to hide behind his deceptively real mask of the self.

2) Literature Review

In comparison to work on other contemporary playwrights, there is relatively limited critical material on Alan Bennett's works: three extant monographs, one English (1997), and two American (1998 and 2001) are devoted to single studies of the author. These works are targeted mainly at the undergraduate market and at the general reader. There are also a small number of journal articles and chapters on Bennett's writing in edited collections. With the exception of Wu (2000) and Hunt (in Brandt 1993), critical work on Bennett takes a literary-critical approach, with few studies engaging in analysis beyond the text and its immediate associations with the author's life. My study promotes an interdisciplinary approach, since Bennett himself contributes to so many genres and forms. Its main perspectives derive from the academic fields of English Literature, Theatre Studies, Film, Television and Cultural Studies.

My study both draws on existing sources and departs from them in a number of ways: Whilst previous studies consider the development of Bennett's work by adopting a chronological approach, my thesis attempts to establish separate (but obviously interacting) chronologies and trajectories for his works. It systematically introduces and contextualises developments, with particular attention to Bennett's amalgamation of established forms into something new, and with an emphasis on Bennett's tendency to distil forms, such as the television monologue, down to their essential elements. Furthermore, this study discusses and contextualises Bennett's newest works, not previously examined critically: the play *The Lady in the Van* (1999), the radio narrative *Hymn* (2001), the autobiographical television monologues *Telling Tales* (2000), and three short stories, a genre in which Bennett first published only in 1998.

Daphne Turner, in the first monograph to be published on Bennett (*In a Manner of Speaking*, 1997) sketches Bennett's development, his comical and nostalgic voices,

outlining the emergence of his social concerns in the television plays. My thesis builds on and integrates several points first formulated by Turner. The most important is the separation between Bennett's southern and northern voices for stage and television plays respectively, which continues until the late 1990s. Another is Turner's examination of how Bennett can be associated with 'Englishness', both as a writer and as a public figure. Turner has laid the foundations for the exploration of Bennett as a writer in disguise, and the recurring figure's alignment with characteristics of the Bennett persona, as explored in Chapter 7 of this thesis. This takes Turner's analysis of Bennett's public self as a starting point and explores the implications of Bennett's increasing foregrounding of his literary self with regard to works published since 1996.

Peter Wolfe in his study, *Understanding Alan Bennett* (1998:8), calls Bennett's persona an "English Midlands version of a Woody Allen". The fact that Wolfe includes Yorkshire within the Midlands suggests that English regional distinctions, so important in the understanding of Bennett's work, are problematic from a transatlantic perspective. This demonstrates the regionally specific quality of Bennett's writing, and the acute and precise distinctions automatically made by a British audience, which would never confuse D.H. Lawrence's Nottingham with Bennett's Leeds, as Wolfe does.

Wolfe, like Turner and O'Mealy concentrates on content and on the interpretation of recurring themes, as well as the chronology of life and works. Like Duncan Wu (1994; see below), Wolfe draws parallels between the plays of Bennett and Anton Chekhov, comparing the honed miniatures of the characters they invent; their preference for the marginalised, the notion of understatement, and the power of what remains unsaid. Wolfe stresses Bennett's use of subtext. Bennett has pointed out¹ that an author can never be conscious of all the implications and alternative readings of his texts, and Wolfe's comments echo this view. In my thesis, this point is expanded to a discussion of Bennett's gradual move towards texts with more controlled subtext, or 'preferred readings'.

¹ For example, in the introduction to *Talking Heads II*, (CTH:120-121).

Wolfe also discusses aspects of provincialism. He acknowledges Bennett's attitude towards his characters as wanting to show them in a non-judgemental way, rather than "explaining the actions of provincial clods to an audience of fellow-sophisticates. He would rather let those provincials surprise – and delight – him." (Wolfe 1998:14)

Like those earlier men from the North [...] Arnold Bennett and D.H. Lawrence, he avoids giving the impression of explaining [...] standing on equal ground with them [...] (Wolfe 1998:14)

Joseph O'Mealy's 2002 monograph, *Alan Bennett. A Critical Introduction*, introduces further approaches, including references to the icon that Bennett has become. O'Mealy is more specific than Wolfe about his book's American perspective, consequently devoting attention to the household name status of Alan Bennett in the UK versus his relative obscurity in the US.² This highlights the issue of cultural specificity in Bennett's work and raises the question of whether foreign audiences can appreciate the regional nuances of Bennett's poetry of provincial speech.

Bennett's contribution to the genre of dramatic monologue is discussed, with the focus on *Talking Heads II*. Like Wolfe and Turner, O'Mealy's focus is on story and plot rather than on generic or formal issues. He also applies Goffman's theses on the presentation of self to his interpretation of both series of the *TH*-monologues. O'Mealy discusses the duality of privacy and exposure with a brief glance at the questions raised about the authorial self in *The Lady in the Van*, which appeared on the London stage shortly before the book went to press.

There are also a small number of scholarly journal articles and book chapters on Bennett. John Bull (1994) formulates what has become a dominant critical position, placing Bennett among the 'smooth men', the generation of playwrights that were, in his view, responsible for the mainstream after more adventurous approaches in previous decades. With reference

only to Bennett's work for the stage, and with the main focus on his first play *Forty Years On*, Bull diagnoses Bennett as backward-looking, and deliberately unfashionable. *Forty Years On* (1968) is described as a "view from the bridge and not the boiler room" (quoted in Scarr 1996:313). As pointed out in Chapter 4 of this thesis, Bennett's early television work has been criticised in a similar way, since it was seen to look back nostalgically on lost worlds rather than tell innovative and radical stories. It can be argued that, to produce such 'unfashionable' work is in itself a subversion of dominant taste, and proof of Bennett's insistence on telling stories suitable to his voice. This might be underlined by the fact that Bull (1994:10) refers to Bennett's early work as an "anomaly". Whether or not this is seen as a disadvantage, it still separates Bennett from what Bull considers 'the norm' of contemporary British playwriting.

Richard Scarr (1996) agrees with Bull's assessment of Bennett as separate from the mainstream of British playwrights, but argues for him as an underrated political playwright: "It is just now that he is in his sixties, whether he realizes it or not, he writes right-wing plays whereas Bennett in his thirties wrote left-wing ones." (Scarr 1996:322) This change in political direction is mainly attributed to Bennett's increasing preoccupation with the notion of Englishness, which for critics has often denoted a reactionary political frame of mind.

Duncan Wu has both written a chapter on and conducted and written up a detailed interview with Bennett. The former is an overview, attributing to Bennett the romantic impulse of escapism, and noting his forensic precision in observation. The latter is a detailed examination of Bennett's play *The Madness of George III* in its first production at the National Theatre in 1991. Since Bennett has hardly given any interviews in the last ten years, this is a significant document, detailing Bennett's wish to be a less naturalistic writer and his 'historical guilt' in the face of the playwright's torn loyalties between accuracy and

² Bennett [...] hardly registers on this side of the Atlantic. We don't have access to the same kind of iconography and our acquaintance with his work is rather spotty. (O'Mealy 2001:xv)

functional dramaturgy. It also offers valuable insight into Bennett's and Nicholas Hytner's collaborative working relationship.³

I'm never mentioned in books about the contemporary theatre. Oleg Kerensky wrote a book not long ago interviewing 417 contemporary playwrights and I didn't even manage to get into that. I do have a definite sensation of not existing.⁴

Bennett rarely features in critical studies that provide generic overviews of contemporary theatre and television.⁵ Popular success and tabloid coverage are often perceived by academic scholars as a reduction of an author's intellectual weight. Paradoxically, this has meant that Bennett has one of the highest profiles of any author in contemporary Britain, but is poignantly omitted from academic publications on twentieth century stage and television drama. Rather his work has most prominently received attention in the popular press through reviews and articles.

Just as Bennett moves through topics and forms in his stage works, "never quite settling" (Eyre 2000:326), popular critics are unsure of his position amongst his contemporaries. As a result of Bennett's increasing integration of autobiographical material into his works, critics tend to include their views on his persona in their assessment of Bennett's works. Critics and journalists either loathe or love Bennett – the reasons often seem to be personal or political and do not always seem to take into account Bennett's importance in the canon of contemporary British playwrights. The use of words in some reviews consulted confirm the critics' view of Bennett as the writer of humorous northern parochialism: he is referred to as "retrospectively oriented, nostalgic, wistful" (Allen Cave 1987:58), a playwright of provincial life.

³ Hytner directed *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Madness of George III*, its film adaptation, *The Madness of King George* and, in 1999, *The Lady in the Van*. Now director of the National Theatre, he is set to direct Bennett's newest play, *The History Boys*, in 2004.

⁴ Bennett in "Alan Bennett: Quite often managing to make himself wince", *The Times*, 28 Nov 1978, quoted in Scarr 1996, p. 320.

⁵ Examples: Bennett is not mentioned in the following works: Innes, C (1992) *Modern British Drama 1890-1990*, Creeber, G (2001) *The Television Genre Book*; Caughie, J (2000) *Television Drama - Realism, Modernism, and British Culture*.

2.1) Plays for the Stage

Since the early 1970s, Bennett's stage plays have been categorised between West End conformism and failed Northern experiments. He is described as a feeble copy of much more 'in-yer-face',⁶ less coded and less ambivalent playwrights, never quite matching, for example, Orton's daring approach: Richard Allen Cave (1987:56) illustrates this, drawing on Bennett's 1973 farce *Habeas Corpus*:

Where Orton is liberating [...] Bennett is nostalgic: his characters are funny because they are trapped between a great inner yearning for a permissive society and an equally intense dread that, if circumstances allowed them to express their secret selves openly, they would totally lose their recognisable identities. [...] Bennett shies away the freedoms the permissive age allows' (Allen Cave 1987:59)

Even at a stage when the Bennett persona was not as dominant in public consciousness as it is now, criticism was still influenced by preconceptions influenced by his public persona. Because Bennett had become famous as one of the four creators and performers of *Beyond the Fringe*, he was for many years categorised as a comic writer, an expectation confirmed by the revue style play *Forty Years On* in 1968. His second play, *Getting On*, suffered as a result of critics finding it difficult to categorise, or pin down what it was about. Sheridan Morley (1974:96) calls it a "murmur of unease", suggesting a "heartfelt" quality, but overall diagnoses its failure as a result of Bennett's giving in to the demands of 'light comedy', not being able to resist a good joke. *Habeas Corpus*, a farce, confirmed Bennett "as a comic writer of an essentially Absurdist mode. [...] his use of comedy has frequently masked his attempts to introduce some thoughts into the laughter" (Bull 1994:181).

In the 1980s, *Enjoy* (1980) and *Kafka's Dick* (1986) were generally met with critical incomprehension. *Enjoy* is possibly Bennett's first attempt to break up the North-South compartmentalisation: it is his first stage play set in the North of England, and the first northern text that is non-naturalistic. Bennett uses the play to launch an attack on moves to

preserve lost northern working class culture by confining it to a museum. It is also a portrait of a deeply dysfunctional and self-deceiving family from one of the last remaining back-to-back houses in Leeds. Critics seemed uncertain how to respond, and the play closed after two weeks. Reviewers felt that Bennett's comedy *Kafka's Dick* tried to do too many things: although a farce, it carries a serious message; although a biographically motivated play, it can be called anti-biographical at the same time. In contrast, the 1990s saw Bennett's most acclaimed successes on the stage: *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Madness of George III* and the double bill *Single Spies*, all of them plays lacking immediately evident northern or autobiographical connections. Bennett comments on the problems that can arise from not writing for just one medium, and from not confining himself to his northern voice:

It will take them [the critics] half an hour to realise it's [*The Madness of George III*] not set in Bradford. And that's what the *Independent* went on about: it wasn't a northern epic.⁷

Since the success of *Writing Home*, a volume containing diaries, essays, reviews and prefaces, in 1994, Bennett's life has become increasingly prominent in his works. The only stage play since then is *The Lady in the Van*, which by its very construction has to be tangled up with concepts of person and persona. Not only is it Bennett's most autobiographical work, but probably one of the most autobiographical plays by any British author. This is obviously reflected in the critical reaction, which concentrates on the duality of Bennett's persona, as reflected on stage in the two Alan Bennetts.

2.2) Plays for Television

By the early 1970s, Bennett had started writing for television, and rather than receiving credit for his versatility, the critical neglect points to his being seen as lacking in specialisation. Although establishing himself as a writer of television and later of film scripts, Bennett does not appear in generic works on television drama. Albert Hunt

⁶ This refers to a book on contemporary British theatre by Aleks Sierz (2002), *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, London: Faber & Faber.

⁷ Alan Bennett speaking at a platform discussion on *The Madness of George III* at the National Theatre, 16 Nov. 1999.

discusses *Bed Among the Lentils* (*Talking Heads I*) in detail in Brandt 1993, but neither Caughie (2000), Day Lewis (1998) nor Creeber (2001) mention his considerable body of work. Bennett in fact attracts more critical attention as a playwright for the theatre. He has identified the lower status of television criticism in comparison with theatre criticism as the very reason for his being more comfortable writing for television than for the stage (Anty 1984:13). Television work, however, does not provide a critic-free sanctuary any more. The expansion of media degrees and the increasing flexibility of what constitutes high and popular culture have meant that the academic profile of television studies has been enhanced. Although television is still not quite regarded as ‘serious’ in comparison with other art forms, television drama is perceived to be at the high end of cultural hierarchy of the medium (see also Caughie 2000:12-13). As a result, the erstwhile ‘poor relation’ of theatre has been receiving considerable critical attention, especially in the 1990s.⁸ Despite Bennett’s constant output and consistent success with audiences, he has become a critical ‘non-entity’ as far as academic scholars are concerned. His first season of television plays, later published as *The Writer in Disguise*, merited a South Bank Show (ITV) in 1979. In 2004, however, a *South Bank Show* in two parts on the history of television drama⁹ failed to mention Bennett’s contribution to the genre, concentrating on figures such as Potter, Poliakoff, McGovern and Loach.

There are perhaps a number of reasons why Bennett’s immense popularity has not been mirrored by critical acknowledgement. Bennett was never part of the inner circle of writers relevant to the most prestigious slots for television drama, *The Wednesday Play* and later *Play for Today*. Bennett remained an outsider, emerging towards the end of what is generally referred to as the ‘Golden Age’ of the television play in the 1960s and early 1970s. Although this period of the dominance of the studio produced single play is often idealised, Bennett’s texts do not fit in with plays which Creeber (2001:9) calls “agitational television and the dramatic airing of topical issues”. *Talking Heads I* made Bennett’s name

⁸ Examples for the expansion of research on television drama are the AHRB-funded, Reading University based research project ‘The BBC Wednesday Play and Postwar British Drama’, and the growing number of monographs, such as Caughie (2000) and Brandt (1993).

at the end of the 1980s, at a time when the single play had virtually disappeared from the screen, and the series or the serial were the dominant forms to be commissioned.

The case of *Talking Heads* and its reception is a useful example of how controversy is made 'safe' by the use of an already established form and expectations of the familiar. Expectations of more 'gems' from 'the master of the monologue' prevented acknowledgement of the monologues as important dramatisations of dominant themes in public perception and the media.

In the end, for all the talk of real speech patterns and real lives, we are taken only to Bennettland, where the past elbows its way into the present, where people say 'As a rule, I steer clear of suede' [...] (Parker 1998:11)

In a way, their popular acclaim has made *Talking Heads* critically suspect, and it could be argued that their commercial success has led to them being considered reactionary. This assessment stands in contrast to the revealing and often sinister character of the monologues, particularly evident in the second series, *Talking Heads II* (1998). They detail the stories of murderers, foot fetishists and paedophiles. Bennett forces the viewer to consider, although not to sympathise with, the personalities of people with whom interaction would normally be undesirable.

The general reaction to Bennett's work seems to confirm the position that accessibility and associations of nostalgia equal critical disinterest.

They [*Green Forms* and *A Visit From Miss Prothero*] evince a bittersweet nostalgia [...] the production lets this conviction permeate through to us at its own pace, not so much wagging a finger as tentatively gesturing with a Rich Tea biscuit.¹⁰

⁹ The South Bank Show on television drama was broadcast in two parts on Feb 1 and 8, 2004, on ITV.

2.3) Critical Framework of the thesis

The way in which my thesis develops and contests the approaches to Bennett's work established in previous writing on the author can now be set out. My thesis aims to analyse Alan Bennett's oeuvre from a perspective that is both interdisciplinary and intertextual, especially with regard to the strong influences of other authors, and the interchanges within Bennett's works, which often lead to genre transformation, resulting in texts that go through evolutionary developments.

The three monographs published on Bennett acknowledge his differing, medium-specific voices, and connect them to the northern and the southern "landscapes of the mind",¹¹ and my thesis also builds on this fundamental distinction. Critical works also associate Bennett with notions of 'Englishness', and with genres seen as vehicles for expression of these ideas, such as comic writing, the pastoral and northern realism. Richard Hoggart's seminal text, *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), has been explicitly acknowledged by Bennett as an influence.

In the comparison between Bennett's and Hoggart's ideas of 'northernness', in my thesis, Bennett emerges as opposed to what he deems to be romanticised notions of northern working class life. Consequently, he is positioned as a writer who observes rather than identifies with his origins. As these origins, and the influences deemed formative, are contextualised, a case for linking Bennett with the poetics and the politics of provincialism emerges. Bennett's works at first carry strong notions of escapism, traditionally associated with northern writing. In his later works, with the centring on his life and persona, he demonstrates a deliberation to be regionally specific, to overcome clichés of northern provincial nostalgia, and insists on a deliberate parochial approach to his subjects and landscapes. The case for literary parochialism has been formulated by the critic Andy

¹⁰ Originally written for the *Financial Times*, accessed Jan. 21 2004, <<http://www.cix.co.uk/~shutters/reviews/96076.htm>>.

¹¹ See also Turner 1997:3 – 26.

Medhurst.¹² Its propagation here is not considered to devalue the political poignancy of Bennett's writing, but simply to personalise and specify the politics in question. Examples from Bennett's television plays, with an emphasis on northern female protagonists, form the case study for a discussion of this new approach to what is often deemed a derogatory term: provincialism.

None of the published monographs or articles on Bennett have so far considered the generic aspects of Bennett's works in detail, in particular his application of autobiographical conventions to genres not traditionally associated with forms of life writing. But rather than examining Bennett's works in a formalist manner, my study discusses the generic characteristics in order to show how form is determined by content, and how Bennett creates flexible forms which can easily be adapted for another medium.¹³ As the development towards greater formal liberation is gradual and incremental, this thesis adopts largely chronological approaches in its different chapters.

Genre¹⁴ theory is at best vague when it comes to distinctions between form, genre or mode, and the matter is further complicated by different academic disciplines having different approaches to exactly what constitutes 'genre'. The term takes on a different meaning in the discipline of Film Studies, for example, from that of English Literature, or Television Studies. As Daniel Chandler has diagnosed in his work, *An Introduction to Genre Theory* (2000), genre definition is highly problematic, as "Genres...are not discrete systems, consisting of a fixed number of listable items" (Gledhill 1985, quoted in Chandler 2000:3).¹⁵ As different media have their own inventory of codes, it is obviously the

¹² Andy Medhurst, Keynote address at interdisciplinary conference 'Other(ing) England', July 2001, University of Buckinghamshire and Chilterns.

¹³ Within this study, the term 'media' is used in a wide sense, meaning the forms of communication Bennett chooses for his work, including stage, television, film, journalism, and prose. Each of these shows certain organic, or linear, tendencies in the evolution of Bennett's forms.

¹⁴ Genre: Kind; genus; class; form; style, esp. in literature, <http://www.dictionary.com>

¹⁵ For example, films can be grouped by 'period or country, director or star or producer or writer or studio, technical process, series, style, structure, ideology, venue, purpose, audience, subject or theme'. (Chandler

interaction between generic conventions and ‘their’ medium that produces ever-evolving genres (see also Chandler 2000:6):

Specific genres tend to be easy to recognize intuitively but difficult (if not impossible) to define. Particular features which are characteristic of a genre are not normally unique to it; it is their relative prominence, combination and functions which are distinctive. (Chandler 2000:3)

This statement conveys the position adopted by this thesis with regard to critical categories. It is not the intention to generically compartmentalise Bennett’s work, but to show how Bennett’s generic awareness gradually leads to work that erodes borderlines of form by the inclusion of conventions from many diverse genres.

A basic model underlying contemporary media theory is a triangular relationship between the text, its producers and its interpreters. [...] Semiotically, a genre can be seen as a shared code between the producers and interpreters of texts included within it. (Chandler 2000:6)

Embedded within texts are assumptions about the ‘ideal reader’, including their attitudes towards the subject matter and often their class, age, gender and ethnicity. (Chandler 2000:6). Fiske (1987:114) sees genre as ‘a means of constructing both the audience and the reading subject’.

Bennett produces work for stage, television and film, areas where even the definition of ‘genre’ differs considerably. For the discussion of Bennett’s generic evolutions, it is suggested that the most convenient (but by no means exclusive) distinctions within his body of work are to be found within various media: stage, television, film, journalism, fiction. Bennett’s main generic conventions could be categorised as: northern, southern, realist, naturalistic, non-naturalistic, historical, comical, biographical and autobiographical. The latter convention and its growth within Bennett’s oeuvre is one of the emphases of this thesis. Several commentators (for example, Turner 1997 and O’Mealy 2002) have noted the way in which Bennett’s work uses autobiographical material. They have also discussed

2000:1) A genre can be seen as a shared code between the producers and interpreters of texts included within it. (Chandler 2000:8)

Bennett's plays and scripts on other writers (Kafka, Proust, Orton, Larkin). In my thesis, these two phenomena are considered in connection with each other, arguing that Bennett often writes about other writers in order to compare himself to them. Always commenting on his insecurity in the face of great writers and 'Literature', Bennett displays what Harold Bloom has termed *The Anxiety of Influence*. This includes stages of parody of other writers' voices (*Forty Years On*, for example), and the examination of what Bennett calls 'the myth of the artist's life'. Bennett links his feelings of inadequacy as a writer to his background, which he has always described as unsuitable, being neither very privileged nor very deprived. He uses this theme to explore the general public response to a writer's life, the connections between life and art, and the cliché of 'art as pain'. In effect, he creates his own critical parameters on ways in which he is influenced, intimidated and inspired by other writers. He also measures himself against their works and, crucially, their lives, which are always described as much more 'typical' and suitable for literary exploitation than his own. Biographical writing emerges as a means of presenting autobiographical material in disguise, in this case hiding behind other writers. Eyre (2000) and O'Mealy (2002) have drawn connections between the spies and writers in Bennett's works. In this thesis, this argument is expanded and systematically examined to show the stages of influence: intimidation, imitation and self-comparison.

Bennett's use of others' lives to express ideas about his own leads to the examination of conventions of autobiography, and ways in which Bennett produces autobiographical work by content, although generally not by form. My study takes the interaction of life and art, which is also integrated in the three extant monographs by Turner, Wolfe and O'Mealy, as a starting point. It does not, however, consider the veracity of autobiographical material, as the interest lies with the nature of Bennett's self-presentation. The thesis argues that Bennett's work is produced out of the tension between wanting to write about his life, and wanting to be private and elusive at the same time, avoiding the consequences of autobiographical exposure.

Within academic and critical parameters, the potential unreliability of autobiography is at the centre of an investigation, whereas, from a 'lay' reader's point of view, autobiographical writing will not be as successful if its artificiality is the focus. Sturrock (in Folkenflik 1993:24) summarises: "they [the Autobiographers] do not write in order to be read generically [...] Rather, they naturalize the conventional methods of narrative or self-analysis so that it strikes us as a failure of our own goodwill if we pause to draw attention to them."

Robert Folkenflik (1993:12) described autobiography as having "democratic potential, with its suggestion that each person has a possible autobiography allotted to him or her, and with its connections to a 'bottom up' historiography that would enfranchise anyone ready to tell his or her tale." Autobiography's link with the quasi-religious contemporary cult of celebrity ensures it being a populist and – within that context – evolving genre. Rising sales figures for autobiographies and heavily publicised serialisations of new biographies in tabloid newspapers confirm that the British population has an increasing appetite for biography and celebrity gossip that far surpasses other European countries. In 2000, more than 4.6 m autobiographies were sold in Britain. Between 1997 and 2000, sales grew from £30m to £47 a year, making it the fastest expanding sector in publishing.¹⁶

Critics and readers share the inability to determine what is fact and what is fiction within autobiography. Critics have observed that readers seem to believe that autobiography gives them access to a core personality, the 'real Me':

For the lay reader, whose interests are the opposite of generic [...] autobiography is not one more contribution to a genre or typology, but the unique self-presentation of the author X or author Y, some public figure this reader already knows, and about whom he or she wants to know more. [...] The theorist's concern is with the genre, not the autobiographer. (Sturrock in Folkenflik 1993:22)

¹⁶ Figures from an article by Rosie Waterhouse, "Flooding the Shelves", *The Sunday Times*, August 12, 2001, p.19.

The awareness of a possible disjuncture between ‘autobiography’ and ‘life’ has recently taken on more importance critically. The rise of literary criticism in the second half of the twentieth century has affected autobiography, both in the way it is written and in the way it is interpreted. Jürgen Schläger states (in Batchelor 1995:62) the critical view that “biography is immune to deconstruction and immune to anti-individualist post-modern tendencies”, because it is built on the principles of individuality and forms part of the “cultural mainstream, thus always helping to defuse their subversive potential” (Ibid). Critics thus paid more attention to the ‘ordered’ past of autobiography for a long time, and it is only relatively recently that the increasingly varied ways of injecting a life into a work have been subject to critical scrutiny.¹⁷ Eakin notes (in Folkenflik 1993:11), that, since the 1980s, autobiography seems to be “receiving the lively attention it deserves [...]” and fashions in literary theory, briefly outlined above, are applied in retrospect. Anderson (2001) puts this down to the shake-up of “poststructuralist interventions”. Here, literary critics start turning their attention specifically towards autobiography.¹⁸ Post-structuralism provides a ‘watershed’ in the way the relationship between text and author is considered. Deconstruction meant that, whereas previously an author’s intentions were paramount to the interpretation of a text, now the text would be considered as a construct. Although the reading of autobiography as merely a textual product “claiming to write the essence of a self” (De Man quoted in Watson, in Folkenflik 1993:62) poses a lot of problems, this critical school of thought has pointed out that it is not authenticity but life representation

¹⁷ Examples are Anderson (2001) and Jolly (2001).

¹⁸ Even though autobiography was not a particular focus of various post-war critical trends, they can still be pointed out as an indirect influence in the evolution of the genre. Folkenflik (1993:9) mentions New Criticism as a movement which, through its rejection of autobiography, set it back from receiving similar critical attention as, for example, poetry, which was seen as “the highest form of literary art” (9). But interest in the self within the text proved irrepressible, and was given a boost by the integration of psychoanalysis into literary theory. The link between Freud’s ‘talking cure’ and the autobiographer’s confessional mode has influenced critics such as Jay (1984).

Reader-oriented theories (lead by theorists such as Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish) emphasised the subjective element in the reception of autobiography. ‘Handing over’ the construction of meaning to the reader means that autobiography has no real meaning until it is identified as such in the act of reading. Autobiographical conventions are therefore determined by the way a reader expects the life to be injected into the writing, and how s/he fits an assessment of the work around these expectations. Other schools of thought, such as Marxist literary criticism, add autobiography’s link with the ‘dominant ideology’. It might be interpreted as a measure of distraction from ‘significant’ political and societal issues, making it a means through which the powerful justify their existence.

that is central to autobiography.¹⁹ De Man and Foucault, for example, both view autobiography as a textual production (see also Jay 1984:18). De Man gives preference to autobiography being “not a series of historical events but a series of efforts to write something. The action proper to autobiography, he insists, is not historical but rhetorical”. (Jay 1984:18) De Man gives the formal priority over the personal: the subject of autobiography is less important than the rules that are set in motion by the aim to write an autobiography. The success of the result is not determined by how truthful or accurate the work is, but by its readability, coherence and entertainment value. Acting is a possible simile, as the success of an actor in a certain part does not depend on whether s/he has personally experienced the sentiments he is acting (although it might help), but on the method of translating these feeling to the audience. Where they come from is not visible to the spectator, and therefore not relevant to the judgement of the performance.

The influence of De Man et al has increased the awareness of autobiography’s subjectivity, and the belief that it is just as likely that the genre determines the ‘life’ as it is that life produces an autobiography. However, Batchelor (1995:9) alerts us to the fact that, however subjective, (auto)biographical information will still add a new dimension to a work’s reading: “We read the work. Then we read the biography. Then we read the work again and we see more.” Post-structuralism, which proclaims textual independence, does thus not form a comfortable relationship with autobiography, which is often understood to proclaim the author as the essence of the text. Similarly, conservative audience expectation regarding the Bennett persona and the veracity of its existence in his works forms an interesting tension with Bennett’s increasingly multi-layered, evasive presentations of self. It seems that the audience’s expectations of life writing do not seem to have evolved alongside developments in critical theory, as also discussed in Chapter 5 with reference to the figure

¹⁹ Are we so certain that autobiography depends on reference, as a photograph depends on its subject or a (realistic) picture on its model? We assume that life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium? (Jay 1984: 8)

of the author in the Romantic age. However, Bennett's latest autobiographical works can be associated with conventions of post structuralism and post-modernity²⁰.

Post-modernism has been described as a culture of choice and of fragmentation of form, where often the choice will be one of knowing deception. It is concerned with the abolition of the rift between popular and 'high' culture. Entertainment thus becomes a central concern within post-modern values. In contrast, modernism, has the search for 'truth' within art at its centre. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, scepticism about this concept is thus that the words 'truth' or 'real' are rarely written without inverted commas. The post-modern age has seemingly come to terms with the relativity of truth. In a late realisation of existentialism's despair over humankind being barred from an ultimate meaning, post-modern culture has taken another way out and chosen the concept of knowing self-deception.²¹ Autobiography lives off being able to deceive, yet knowingness has increased. A story as told in a television programme is still taken to be real, even if we see the director giving instructions during a docu-soap, or reality TV. Few measures are taken to hide the artificiality of life-construction from us, but we still choose to believe its real-ness, because it suits us, and we are not encouraged to dissect critically, but to be entertained. This knowingness (and a possible degree of disillusionment that comes with it) does, then, not change the fact that the possibility of 'real-ness' will make autobiographical writing a more popular choice than 'fiction'.²²

The post-modern era, with its absence of grand narratives, and emphasis on the consumer's pleasure in familiar formats and self-presentation seems to encourage autobiographical

²⁰ Summarised, for example, by Anderson (2001) and by Ashley et al (1994).

²¹ The recent Channel 4 documentary series, *Faking It* (2002), is an exemplary case of the post-modern condition: a contestant is asked to acquire skills in a profession very different from his/ her own (a classical pianist retrain as a Club DJ in two weeks, for example). The emphasis is not necessarily on the candidates' competence in the new field, but on *performing* their new identity in order to deceive the judges, who are experts in the field. The broad audience has also learned through media representation of celebrities that what is produced as a 'life' for our consumption can be a deftly manipulated illusion to satisfy our expectations.

²² Example: In the *Media Guardian*, in the column 'My cultural life', many interviewees, when asked what their preferred reading is, will express a preference of 'fact' over fiction. 'Fact' in this context is constituted by history books, autobiographies and biographies.

writing, while also challenging traditional formal conventions. The post-modern age has centred on the personal (as opposed to the political, societal) in a culture that celebrates self-centredness²³ and obsession with the lives of other, especially famous, people.

The rumblings of postmodernist debate have also shaken the constructed foundations of autobiography studies. In traditional studies of autobiography the terms that are likely to shift within post-modernism – particularly history and subjectivity – are taken as the stable elements in the story of one's life. Texts that can affirm this stability, or that can be construed as affirming it, form the "tradition" of autobiography. (Ashley et al. 1994:5)

Scepticism of genre conventions leads to experiments in the expansion of these conventions. For autobiography, this means that its boundaries of form have expanded, but also that critics increasingly examine texts that would "previously have been barred from consideration as 'autobiography'". (Ashley et al 1994:5) This is an important point with regard to the approach of this thesis, which sees autobiography as a convention which can be attached to almost any literary form. The post-modern uncertainty about values and the fixedness of forms has built on the foundations of the deconstructionist de-mystification of declaring autobiography as a textual product attempting to represent a life, and distinguishing between the 'I' and the written 'I' (de Man in McQuillan 2001:75).²⁴

Bennett's latest works, in particular *The Lady in the Van* (discussed in Chapter 8), can be placed within these post-modern conventions, which seem to be suited to the exploration of texts increasingly and inextricably tied to the public persona of their author.

Bennett's autobiographical works, particularly those that feature what he has termed 'the writer in disguise' lead to an examination of the ways in which Bennett integrates his persona into his works, and the ways in which this is influenced by audience expectation.

²³ Television advertisements, always a good reflection of what will go straight to the heart of the consumer, increasingly consist of campaigns based on the unashamed celebration of selfishness: Jaffa Cakes have the slogan 'deliciously self-centered', Terry's Orange chocolate uses 'It's not Terry's, it's mine!', and Muller Joghurt uses 'There's Mother love, and there's Muller love' to justify a mother eating her child's lunchpack-yoghurt.

²⁴ To the extent that definitions of autobiography derive from the reference between the person who says I and the I that is no a person but a function of language, these definitions can always be destabilised through reference to this dissonance. (Ashley et al. 1994:6)

O'Mealy (2002) examines the influence of Goffman and behaviourist theory ('Dramaturgy') on Bennett, using the example of the *Talking Heads* monologues. In my thesis, this is expanded into an investigation into other works that Bennett declares as originating in questions linked with Goffman's theory of the presentation of self, notably *The Madness of George III* and the documentary *Dinner at Noon*.

The decision to make dramaturgical analysis a tool for the exploration of the authorial persona here is partly motivated by Bennett's own documented interest²⁵ in behaviourism, the works of Goffman, in particular *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and its potential for practical application.

As with all the best books, I took Goffman's work to be somehow a secret between me and the author, and incidents such as I have detailed above our private joke. Individuals knew they behaved this way, but Goffman knew everyone behaved like this, and so did I. Only we were both keeping it quiet. (WH:476)

Goffman's work on the ways the self presents itself and is read informs an ongoing exploration into the difference between 'being oneself' and 'seeming oneself' in Alan Bennett's work. Goffman is one of the founders of dramaturgy as a way of social analysis. His theory on the presentation of self is based on the analysis of observed behaviour and assumes the presentation of the self as the creation of a performance. Goffman's work emphasises "the importance of empirically observing behaviour (as opposed to invisible mental processes, such as thought, feeling or memory)" (O'Sullivan et al: 28).²⁶ Bennett credits Goffman as a writer and sociologist who "startles one into self-recognition" (WH:478). At the centre of Goffman's analysis of behaviour in public spaces is the statement that we live by inference, meaning that in behaving in a certain way, we make others make certain assumptions about us, which are combined with social and statistical knowledge.

²⁵ See, for example "Cold Sweat", Bennett's review of Goffman's *Forms of Talk*, WH:475 ff.

²⁶ For Goffman, observation was first, theory second. [...] every encounter [...] was an occasion to see what was going on in terms of his general thesis that life is an interactionally produced theater-like product involving scenes, props, settings, and manifold possibilities for disaster. [...] He was interested in not what people were intending to do, but simply what they did [...]. (Brissett & Edgley 1990:38-39)

[...] it will be in his [the individual's] interest to control the conduct of the others, especially their responsive treatment of him. This control is achieved largely by influencing the definition of the situation which the others come to formulate, and he can influence this definition by expressing himself in such a way as to give them the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his own plan. (Goffman 1959:15)

The wish to be perceived in a certain way motivates behaviour that will communicate messages that can be read to bring about the desired perception. This can apply to the communication of social status, power in relation to the recipient, or a role within a particular context. Bennett comments: "We skitter anxiously from cradle to grave, like a tart between lamp-posts. 'I won't make you feel bad, if you don't make me feel bad.' That is the social contract." (*WH*:478)

Apart from establishing the suitability of post-modern parameters for Bennett's recent work, the final chapter in this thesis propagates a narratological perspective on the evolving Bennett persona. Drawing on summative works such as McQuillan (2000) and Onega and Landa (1996), significant critical sources such as Genette and Baal are contextualised in relation to Bennett's work. Focal points are concepts of the implied author, the relationship between text and subtext and the notion of the unreliable narrator.

As established in the previous section, Bennett has disseminated extensive information about his life in his works, while remaining reluctant to confirm its veracity, or reveal the editorial process his material, mostly taken from his life, undergoes. His intention seems thus to leave the recipient in uncertainty as to the reliability of information. In this section, it is argued that this effect of increasing unreliability is mainly achieved through narratological organisation of material.²⁷ This is in contrast to previous chapters, where the emphasis is not on critical thought associated with structuralism. It is, however, deemed an

²⁷ Narratology became an important aspect of literary theory in the era when Structuralism was the dominant approach to texts. Its purpose is not to examine content, but narrative structures, i.e. "the nature of story [...] as a concept and as cultural practice" (Barry 2002:222).

appropriate tool for the investigation of a tendency within Bennett's work that seems to increasingly focus on the figure of the intra- or extradiegetic narrator.

Writings on narratology focus on prose fiction examples of narrators and their position within a text, resulting in a shortage of research within the field of drama. Even if one considers the playtext on the page, without the implications of staging or screening, the dialogic nature of drama means that there often seems to be a different kind of implied author for each of the characters. When staged, a text contains not only the encodings of the author, but also the director's and the creative team's interpretations of those encodings, and their own re-encodings. This can lead to difficulties in interpretation.

Bennett's newest stage play, *The Lady in the Van* (1999), has not previously been critically examined in detail, with the exception of a short discussion of the way the diary version of the story was transformed into the play (O'Mealy 2002:152-156). Bennett explains that "one of the main themes of the play is the departure from what really happened."²⁸ One might add that *The Lady in the Van* is a play telling a 'real' story, but focusing on the manipulation and reinvention of reality. The implied author of previous works changes to the explicit, performed author. In the play, Bennett has split his own character into two, Alan Bennett and Alan Bennett 2. This is seen as a confirmation that, for Bennett, his presentation of self in his works as being in two minds is a permanent position.

In summary, this thesis embarks on the application of critical models to an author who has not been subject to such investigations previously. The titles of its chapters – 'Bennett's Selves', 'Writers and Disguises', 'Masks and Doubles' – indicate the multiplicity and instability of Bennett's personifications, both in self-representation and generic variety. The findings of the discussions and various chronologies established in the thesis encourage a critical re-evaluation of Alan Bennett as an interdisciplinary writer, theatre and screen practitioner and intellectual maverick – all of these, of course, largely in disguise.

²⁸ Alan Bennett, speaking at a platform event on *MGIII* at the National Theatre, Nov. 16, 1999.

3) Bennett and Englishness

Parkinson: What's it like being a National Treasure?

Judi Dench: I wouldn't like having a fence around me and a plaque...I think Alan Bennett's a National Treasure. (to Parkinson) You are. It must be a Yorkshire thing.¹

Alan Bennett is often described as the embodiment of Englishness. In recent years he has frequently been referred to as 'much loved' or as a 'national treasure' and has a prominent position in British cultural life. Despite Bennett's versatility and originality as a writer, the audience's main interest seems to be in his public persona and the connections between Bennett's life and his work. The phenomenon of the persona has had some impact on both the reception of Bennett's works and on the kind of work he produces.

Bennett's public role happens to be one the British public adore: the most successful playwright of his time as a nebbish with bicycle clips. Public envy, so easy to ignite, is undercut by his self-presentation as a socially crippled eccentric in tweeds and owlsh glasses. (Buruma 1995:16)

All Bennett's recent works are bestsellers, sell-outs in the theatre, or reach impressive viewing figures on television. Bennett's reputation as a crowd-pleaser makes critics and academics suspicious. He has been described as a worthy successor to John Betjeman in addressing "the poetry of ordinary people's speech" (Wells 1995:2). This means he has also inherited the critical scepticism that Betjeman received, as well as the 'national treasure' soubriquet:

[...] Bennett has mutated into the kind of national treasure that can be depended upon to make a seasonal appearance – a role that used to be shared out between John Betjeman and Morecambe and Wise. (Sexton 2001)

This suggests a broad appeal, which can transcend boundaries of class, and sometimes gender and race. Bennett's continuing closeness to his origins can convey to readers that artists from a working class environment can succeed without the benefit of affluence or birth privilege. His increased writing about his childhood and youth in recent years has

¹ Quoted from Parkinson, BBC 1, March 9 2002. Judi Dench was born in York.

made for an even stronger public appeal and invites recognition and identification. The aspirational aspects of his upbringing, and some of the characters featuring in his works (the mostly solidly middle class characters in *Talking Heads* I and II, for example) promote him as a writer of the middle classes. This is frequently mocked by his critics or parodists.² seen to embody the over-familiar, safe and reactionary Bennett who appeals to all generations of a family. It is debatable whether Bennett, in writing plays that take place in an upper-class environment (most notably the three Spy-plays, *A Question of Attribution*, *An Englishman Abroad* and *The Old Country*), aims to appeal to upper class audiences.

An informal survey of colleagues and students³ about Alan Bennett's image produced a varied response. Alan Bennett, for example, is seen both as a typical Yorkshireman and an Oxford wit. His presence as a shy, self-effacing literary figure ("a donnish figure with bicycle clips", Wells 1995:2) has turned him into a recognisable public persona, thus often subject to parody. He is respected as a diarist of contemporary life, and seen as an embodiment of Englishness, preservationist in attitude. He is also described as an author who can produce funny writing, but from whom nothing progressive or politically subversive is expected. His political opinion is seen as reactionary, in keeping with his categorisation as an author who tells of the past, and he is referred to as the embodied voice of the middle classes.

I mean, I'm not a fan of Alan Bennett; I am certainly not a fan of his cosy, tight-arsed little England-world, which stops in 1947⁴

Englishness in Alan Bennett's writing is inextricably connected to his sense of both social class and regionalism. His origins in the north of England and subsequent development have to be examined in the context of their time.

² The satirical Radio 4 series, *Dead Ringers*, is an example: as in one of its predecessors, *Spitting Image*, Bennett is parodied together with Thora Hird, the conversation always ending with 'a nice cup of tea'.

³ In April 2002, School of Performance and Cultural Industries, University of Leeds.

3.1) Provincialism

The working-classes are at bottom in excellent health – so the pastoral descriptions run – in better health than other classes; rough and unpolished perhaps, but diamonds nevertheless; rugged, but ‘of sterling worth’: not refined, not intellectual, but with both feet on the ground; capable of a good belly-laugh, charitable and forthright. They are, moreover, possessed of a racy and salty speech, touched with wit, but always with its hard grain of common sense. (Hoggart 1958:14-5)

Alan Bennett originates from the kind of 1930s and 1940s northern working class background that Richard Hoggart describes in his influential work *The Uses of Literacy* (1958). Bennett could not, however, be described as a writer *of* the working classes, but rather as an author who writes *about* aspiring working class and lower middle-class characters from a position of upward mobility. As Bennett has argued, someone who observes cannot be amidst the action, but has to stay detached from it. This principle might be applied to his own situation of disjuncture, as one who originated from a specific class, environment and region, but left it while he was still young.

Although he fits into the category of the ‘Scholarship Boy’ that Hoggart describes, Bennett is conscious of the pitfalls of romanticised working class views. Whereas Hoggart blames the infiltration of new and mass media for the decline in working class identity, Bennett is more ambivalent, stating that the risk when writing ‘about a childhood in the north, is that you may end up writing an extended Hovis commercial.’ (*Tales*:10) He has often expressed scepticism about the more sentimental aspects of representations of the north. His own sentiments, however, appear ambiguous, as he has written pastoral pieces about the north as it once was (e.g. *A Day Out* in 1972), but has also produced scathing satires on false notions of northern heritage, where people are encouraged to ‘be typical’ (e.g. *Enjoy* in 1980).

Bennett’s ambivalent relationship with his northern origins has its foundations in the books he read as a child.⁵ His early reading featured children who lived either in extreme idyllic

⁴Tom Paulin in *The Late Review*, BBC2, Nov. 98.

⁵ The influence of Bennett’s childhood and the surrounding northern women of his family have also been discussed in works such as Turner (1997), Wolfe (1998) and O’Mealy (2001).

or extreme deprived surroundings, and he could detect neither in his own childhood. Leeds, with its nineteenth century architecture, did not have the 'right' kind of old buildings for a youth "famished for antiquity"; the surrounding landscape was not sufficiently pastoral. Bennett even took it as a sign of Leeds' insignificance that the city suffered little damage from German bombers during World War II (*Tales*:26). Thinking that books represented life as it should be, Bennett at first asked himself what was wrong with his life, and then resigned himself to the fact that it was never going to live up to the expectations set by literature.⁶

Bennett calls his childhood "above all ordinary", in accordance with the description his parents would have given of themselves: "not working class, certainly not middle class, but ordinary [...] being ordinary was a state to which they almost aspired" (*Tales*:10-11). The importance of 'knowing one's place' for this generation, not pretending to be something one was not, clashed with the wish for their children to have more educational opportunities than they had enjoyed. Education often created separation between parents and child. Bennett, who has described himself as a "frightful little creep" (*Poetry II*:9), was a bright child and was among the top of the class throughout his education. While this was welcomed by his parents, they called his homework and revising "your swotting", an expression they later transferred to his work as a writer. On the one hand, they wanted him to "speak properly", to demonstrate the effect of educational opportunities; on the other hand, they did not want their son to rise above their station by "putting it on". Bennett's father particularly was "hot on anything smacking of social pretension" (*WH*:x): "As a child I was clever and knew it and when I showed off, as I often did, Dad would not trouble to hide his distaste." (*Untold Stories*:15) Bennett admits in hindsight that he was always subconsciously including his father's judgement in his considerations about his writing.

Like many artists from a similar background, Bennett feels the guilt that can be associated with upward mobility, the fear of being labelled pretentious. Hoggart's landmark work, which was published in 1958, appeared at the same time that 'ordinary' lives were exposed as the subject of plays and films: *Look Back in Anger*, for instance, premiered in 1956 at the Royal Court Theatre. The working class was thus moving into the dramatic mainstream,

⁶ See also *WH*:5, "The Treachery of Books".

and Bennett self-ironically states, “had I known it was going to become fashionable I might have enjoyed it more” (*Tales*:14). Bennett’s loyalty to and belief in the importance of his origins clashed with his desire for self-improvement and his passion for ‘high’ art. While always expressing gratitude for his educational opportunities, Bennett has openly admitted that he sometimes deliberately downgrades his background on the social scale, conveniently forgetting some of the privileges and successes he enjoyed during his early years.⁷ This paradoxical aspiration to deprivation suggests that Bennett does not want to be seen as showing off. Modesty and self-deprecation are virtues that are encouraged in a traditional Yorkshire environment: one must not get above oneself, one must not forget where one came from, and one must always deny that success is deserved. Bennett’s work is accordingly characterised by self-deprecation.

Bennett has never described himself as one who was part of or wrote about the working classes, once claiming that it was not class he was interested in or liked, but “classes, types” (*Dinner at Noon* in *WH*:42). The ‘types’ that Bennett portrays in his works are mostly outsiders, characters on the sidelines; separated from others by class, social embarrassment, lack of confidence or lack of eloquence. When it comes to writing about his parents’ generation, Bennett frequently focuses on what he terms “an almost ecological loss of habitat” (*Virginia Woolf*:ix). Texts like the television play *Sunset Across the Bay* (1975) contain important social commentary on the expulsion of people similar to Bennett’s parents in the course of the ‘modernisation’ of cities in the 1960s and 1970s. While *Sunset* shows the destruction of a complete neighbourhood in Leeds, *Enjoy* exposes the hypocrisy of authorities insensitive to the needs of the population, but wanting to cash in on the ‘heritage’ industry.

Bennett belonged to a civic community which invested in academic potential: Leeds. A good performance at secondary level and acceptance by a university automatically provided a scholarship by the city, and state scholarships were topped up by the Corporation Education Department: “the city educates its own” (*Tales*:91). Bennett is thus a classic case of the scholarship boy from the provinces, excelling at grammar school, chosen to learn

⁷ See, for example, the Introduction to *Telling Tales* (13 –14). Bennett’s comments on ‘deprivation’ are discussed in detail in Chapter 5) of this thesis.

Russian for Intelligence purposes during his National Service, and subsequently winning a place at Oxford.

Bennett and Hoggart's views collide when it comes to surveying the impact of change on their working class origins. Initially, Bennett referred to his origins as something to be ashamed of, and to react against. *Writing Home* describes his embarrassment at his parents' inability to be more socially adept.⁸ On outings, they would only order a pot of tea, and Bennett's mother would smuggle in sandwiches which had to be eaten hastily while the waitress was not looking. At social gatherings, his parents would remain silent, conscious of their lack of education. His mother's fear of "folks knowing all her business" drove her to delusion and depression. Bennett was made sharply aware of what he presumed were social inadequacies when he went to Oxford with a new set of Antler suitcases:

That I still had not acquired a past hit me the minute I entered the lodge of my college. It was piled high with trunks: trunks pasted with ancient labels, trunks that had holidayed in Grand Hotels, travelled first-class on liners, trunks painted with four, nay, even *five*, initials. [...] These trunks spoke memory. I had two shameful Antler suitcases that I had gone with my mother to buy at Schofields in Leeds [...]. (WH:501)

Bennett distanced himself from his origins before returning to them in his later career. At first, he longed for escape, change and excitement; later he realised that he was linked to his 'roots', and was anxious to preserve what was left of his past. He admits that, by the time his parents started to embrace change, 'branching out' after his father had retired, their son did not want them to change anymore. Bennett celebrates the value of inertia in his comments on *The Dalesman*:

[...] this Yorkshire magazine doesn't change – or does so in a way that you scarcely notice. Its form and contents, the cover, the recipes, the illustrations and the jokes – they're all as they were 30-odd years ago. And none the worse for that. "When it's not necessary to change," said the 17th century Lord Falkland, "it's necessary not to change." (Bennett in Mitchell 1988:1)

Bennett's childhood has become the most prolific source and the most important influence in his works. The 'undisguised' child Bennett enters his work at a late stage: while there are some childhood flashbacks in the 1980s, in works such as *Intensive Care* and *All Day on*

the Sands, it is not until “Untold Stories” (1999), *Telling Tales* (2000) and *Hymn* (2001) that Bennett directly confronts his own childhood, and the relationship with his parents, especially his father. He writes about the past from the perspective of the present, and works his way backwards, as indeed he used to do when reading biographies (*Poetry* II:9). Just as childhood was the last thing he wanted to learn about, so childhood is last in the chronology of his career. In a preface to the short story “Father! Father! Burning Bright” (*LRB* 1998) he calls this “tidying up my Nachlass”.

To younger readers they [the plays] may seem old-fashioned and even antique, but they always were even at the time of writing. Writing and recollection are inextricable and I never felt that I was chronicling my own times, simply because so much of the dialogue came out of remembrance of childhood. (*Virginia Woolf* 2003, Introduction:vii)

A northern childhood is inextricably associated with provincialism. As defined by the OED, provincial implies

‘Having the manners or speech of a province or ‘the provinces’; exhibiting the character, especially the narrowness of view or interest, associated with or attributed to inhabitants of ‘the provinces’; wanting the culture or polish of the capital.’ (*OED Online*)

This definition suggests that ‘provincial’ is an unsatisfactory condition. Provincialism, or even regionalism, a term less burdened with negative connotations, has hardly received any critical attention within the field of drama, there being a tacit understanding that modernity and regionalism are mutually exclusive (Mecklenburg 1996:7)⁹. If ‘great’ art aspires to the universal, the provincial carries the notion of the monocultural with a corresponding implication of a rejection of the cosmopolitan. Alan Bennett’s northern characters certainly have ‘the manners or speech of ‘the provinces’’, although it would be an insult to the individuals they resemble and the author to assume automatically that they wanted ‘the culture or polish of the capital’. On the one hand, the theme of escape is prominent in Bennett’s work:

⁸ See, for example *WH*:ix, 3 and 498.

⁹ “Solcher auf ein historisches Phaenomen eingegrenzten Diagnose scheint das in der Literaturkritik lange allgemein verbreitete Vorurteil zu entsprechen, Regionalismus und Moderne schloessen einander grundsatzlich aus.” (Mecklenburg 1986:7).

[...] life is elsewhere and one of the incentives to get away to university is just to be somewhere else and lead the life and see the places I read about in books. Leeds and a childhood in Leeds do not figure in any of the books I read, the provinces still – well – provincial. (*Tales*:14)¹⁰

On the other hand, Bennett's work contains the realisation that he underestimated the formative influence and relevance of his upbringing. Thus, gradually, "the internal voice he hears most clearly" (Anty 1984:13), that of the north, increases in importance. Furthermore, Bennett *has* a non-provincial, or metropolitan voice at his disposal (see Chapter 4), but his choice has lately been to use the northern provincial one more extensively.

The general critical reaction to Bennett's work suggests that accessibility and popularity (especially with an audience of a certain age) is seen as bland and middlebrow. As a 'much-loved' writer, critics hold he simply *cannot* be cutting edge, and as a 'family favourite', writing about Northern characters who are not demonstrating against the closure of a pit and who are not escaping to realise their full potential down south, he *has* to be provincial.

The more we look at working-class life, the more we try to reach the core of working-class attitudes, the more surely does it appear that the core is the sense of the personal, the concrete, the local: it is embodied in the idea of, first, the family and, second, the neighbourhood. This remains, though much works against it, and partly because so much works against it. (Hoggart 1958:33)

Hoggart and Bennett are on common ground with the notion of the concrete and the local, although they evaluate it in different ways. Bennett's work shows notions of the deliberately (defiantly?) parochial: characters are anchored in their environment and do not often move out far away from it: a bicycle trip from Halifax to Fountain's Abbey, a move from Leeds to Morecambe, a life between a drab office and a suburban semi, a trip to the cemetery. Some of these scenarios are exchangeable, anonymous, only identifiable as part of the North through the air of hopelessness. This reaches back to the view out of the windows from drab attic rooms in kitchen sink realism films, *A Taste of Honey*, or *Room at*

¹⁰ "I was, however, at one with Bennett in his wish to get out of the place. This was one of the few emotions common to sensitive Leeds teenagers. The most powerful encouragement to do so in the Classical Sixth at Leeds Grammar School came from our teachers - who told us that if we didn't work harder we would 'end up at Leeds University.'" Reader's letter from Chris Price, *London Review of Books*, vol 22, no. 22, 16 November 2000, accessed December 2 2004.
<<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v22/n22/letters.html#35>>

the Top. Bennett's northern locations have the same kind of quality, showing the characters' interaction with their environment.

The expression 'parochial' generally has connotations just as negative as 'provincial', but its definition includes the regionally specific, as identifiable to one particular parish. The critic Andy Medhurst has adopted a fresh approach to the concept of the parochial in literature. What has been termed "narrow-minded, concerned only with narrow local concerns without any regard for more general or wider issues" (Encarta Online Encyclopaedia) should, according to Medhurst, rather be considered as "speaking from a position of insideness".

When we change scale we think and behave differently: nations are abstractions, regions are generally defined from the outside in, they are about form and function, they are academic, institutional or political creations. Locality needs to be defined from the inside, with a cultural and natural base, less abstraction, more detail. (Clifford and King:n.pag.)

Although the concept of equating 'northern' and 'provincial' has been destabilised, I would still argue that Bennett adheres to what is *deemed* provincial. His northern work neither shows characters who engage with the recent northern renaissance, nor is it driven by sentimental working-class nostalgia, 'we were poor but we were happy' narratives. His characters do not live in loft apartments, nouveau north style, nor do they play in brass bands, rugged-but-beautiful northern style. Instead, his writing emphatically presents how unspectacular, dull and humdrum lives were in his native Leeds in the 1940s and 1950s. Bennett has been accused of being stuck in the past, in his representation of the language and tone of the 1950s. The pleasure of engaging with a specific, deliberately parochial setting on stage or screen cannot be dismissed merely as a refusal to move with the times. Rather, it has to be seen as the need to have one's identity confirmed, and to be treated as significant. The desire for a knowable community where "[...] it was all clean and you could walk down the street and folks smiled and passed the time of day" (*CTH*:116), is an unfashionable, anti-modernist appeal to restore things to their former order. More importantly, however, it has notions of a deep unease about an environment that is becoming less and less identifiable as belonging to a regional or social setting, and where

people unable to keep up with changes become redundant. In Bennettland, globalisation creates isolation.

Bennett's language evokes pleasures of the familiar, conspiratorially drawing the audience into the work through shared references and shared language. The specific, parochial appeal of Bennett's work is also due to his protagonists, some of whom are adapted from types of people close to him. In an environment where treats and excitement were few, small events, registers and pitch of language, as well as behavioural idiosyncrasies became the foundation of the Bennett repertory. He describes this environment as one "where women did all the talking" (*CTH*:127), drawing a connection between his life then and the later dominance of female characters in his works. Although he had always preserved the conversations he eavesdropped on as a child, Bennett states he only realised the linguistic and behavioural distinctiveness of northern women when he saw Denis Mitchell's documentary *Morning in the Streets* (1959). Having been educated to believe that art and northern everyday life were not combinable, Mitchell's work demonstrated that everyday lives made excellent raw material for art. Forty years later, one of the Alan Bennett characters in *The Lady in the Van* (20) refers to little old ladies as his "niche" or his "bread and butter".

Northern women are another species. Like the Galapagos turtles (whom some of them resemble) they have developed own characteristics and attitudes. Hopes are doomed to be dashed, expectations not to be realised because that's the way God, who certainly speaks with a Southern accent, has arranged things. (*Office Suite*:2)

In portraying northern lives, Bennett gives a voice to those who would not normally be heard. His approach is a detailed picture of a person, sometimes unflattering, which demands that attention must be paid. It does not, however, demand blind sympathy. Despite choosing the supposedly humdrum lives of ordinary people, and making them regionally specific, Bennett does not make dramas like *Talking Heads I* and *II* easy to watch. Several characters are portrayed as boring; nearly all of them lie to themselves or to others, and all the plays forcefully bring home the notion of characters unhappily trapped in their own lives. The women in these plays find it difficult to adjust to linguistic and social change, mirroring the anxieties within Alan Bennett's core audience. Changes in language (politically correct speech, for example) document the instability of a world which seems to

be no longer theirs. Language is seen as part of this destabilisation, and new words and trends are mocked. The new and the other are generally seen as threat.

Elderly women are often shown in scenes with their grown-up sons, whom they treat as if they were still children, asking them interfering questions about their digestive system and uttering a steady stream of suspicions and non-sequiturs. In Bennett's earlier television plays, some of the elderly northern women are presented with merciless precision, almost amounting to a dissection. 'Auntie Kitty' in *Intensive Care*, for example, has only narrowly escaped strangulation, according to her brother. The following makes us understand why:

I thought you'd have been here a bit since. I was here at 3 o'clock. You'll notice a big change. He's not like my brother. He's not the Frank I knew. I don't dislike this colour scheme. I always liked oatmeal. The doctor's black. (*Objects*:181)

The favourite topics are dirt, disease and the lavatory, another echo of Bennett's mother: "What memory was for Proust the lavatory is for my mam." (*Van*:6), Bennett has remarked. Hygiene is the standard against which all things in life are measured, and there will be an intricate value system involved when judging other people, based on social distinctions Bennett's mother had established: "She'd talk about people being 'better-class, 'well off', nicely spoken', 'refined', 'genuine', 'ordinary' and – the ultimate condemnation – 'common'." (*WH*:43 – 44) According to someone who grew up in similar circumstances to Bennett, 'common' is still a worse insult than a four-letter word, is mainly used with reference to a woman, and is a judgement that will not depend on money, origin or class background.¹¹ It implies a lack of appropriate behaviour, dress sense and restraint for one's 'station' (see also 'showing off' above). This restraint creates the feeling of being trapped, and often Bennett's elderly women will blame their social restrictions on their lack of education, just as Bennett's parents might have done.

The middle-aged, unmarried woman is another Bennett 'type'. Examples are Miss Schofield in *A Woman of No Importance*, Miss Ruddock in *A Lady of Letters* and Miss Fozzard in *Miss Fozzard Finds her Feet*.¹² These middle-aged ladies, secretaries or shop

¹¹ I am grateful to my neighbour, Simon Child, for clarifying the use of this expression.

¹² These three monologues are all published in *The Complete Talking Heads*. All three characters are played by Patricia Routledge in their televised versions. She is also well known for playing Hyacinth Bucket ('Bouquet') in the comedy series *Keeping Up Appearances* (BBC1). Obsessed with status and status symbols, this character has similar pretensions to Routledge's three *Talking Heads* protagonists.

assistants, are constantly trying to increase their status. Although people do not take much interest in them, they manage to convince themselves that they matter, and that they are a cut above the rest. This attitude expresses itself in a particularly mannered way of speaking, exaggerated in construction and using words that seem heightened and betray social pretence: Miss Fozzard says that her brother “broadcasts the entire contents of his bladder down the stairs” (CTH:147), Miss Schofield “frequents a table” or “concludes her coffee” (CTH:14). Like most of Bennett’s northern characters, these women are trapped in restrictive lives which can only be made bearable through shielding themselves from obvious truths and through editing reality. They are built up convincingly as characters to whom nothing is more important than respectability, and we see the stifling nature of this ambition. Yet, frequently, Bennett gradually turns these carefully constructed images on their heads. Miss Fozzard, in *Miss Fozzard Finds her Feet (Talking Heads II)* is the personification of a middle class, middle aged and vaguely conservative Englishwoman. She is filmed throughout the monologue in an environment that does not suggest anything other than this image; she is perceived as one of the pretentious middle class woman that Bennett is so famous for, talking about “spearhead[ing] the provision of pot-pourri in the ladies’ toilets” (CTH:153). While Miss Fozzard’s appearance and speech do not change throughout the monologue, the subtext gradually makes us realise that she is offering sexual services to her chiropodist, who is a shoe fetishist. The encounters between him and Miss Fozzard are described in minute detail, yet we are unsure until the very end whether Miss Fozzard realises (or wants to realise) what she is actually doing. When it finally becomes clear that she does, she solves the problem by simply not naming her activities – as long as there are no words for them, she can continue to convince herself of her respectability:

Little envelope on the hall table as I go out, never mentioned, and if there’s been anything beyond the call of duty there’ll be that little bit extra. Buys me no end of footwear generally. I keep thinking where’s it all going to end but we’ll walk that plank when we come to it. [...] I suppose there’s a word for what I’m doing but...I skirt round it. [FADE] (CTH:157)

Despite frequent subversion and merciless precision in their portrayal, Bennett’s women are generally seen to be affectionate and accurate takes on familiar characters.

3.2) Bennett and Realism

In keeping with the perception of Bennett as an author who writes in the voices of familiar, real life characters from the provinces, he is credited as having “a gift for naturalistic dialogue” (Badder 1978:73). Most of Bennett’s television works can be placed in a naturalistic or realist mode,¹³ although he does not comment on their descent from conventions of kitchen sink or domestic realism. Real people are always the model for Bennett’s characters, and he aims to equip them with voices he has heard. Given his origins, these characters are often northern working class or lower middle class – all these characteristics are associated with northern domestic realism. With the specification of realism to working-class realism around the early 1960s,¹⁴ writers and directors, often from working class backgrounds themselves, and with strong social concerns, aimed to produce drama that paid attention to (and was supposed to attract) audiences from a similar class background.

Samantha Lay (2002:5) suggests that the term ‘realism’ should not be used without a prefix, but it is difficult to determine which one that should be for Bennett: working-class realism? Social realism? The confusing variety of ‘realisms’ has to be narrowed down by using definitions drawn up by Raymond Williams who has described domestic realism as “the injection of new content into an orthodox dramatic form” (Williams 1978:498; see also Lay 2002:9). It is generally described as secular, contemporary and relevant in its linking of characters and the impact on them through politics, and intent on extending the boundaries of representation, both socially and geographically. It is also distinguishable from naturalism by the clarity of expression of authorial intent.

¹³ According to Cook (1998:27), there is a distinction between realism and naturalism, in that naturalism ‘eventually came to be perceived as a passive form. People were felt to be stuck where they were [...], with no possibility of changing their social lot’. Realism, most functional when defined in contradiction to something else, consequently emerged as a form where intervention and change was a possibility’, Raymond Williams, “Realism and Non-Naturalism 1”, *The Official Programme of the Edinburgh International Television Festival* 1977:30.

¹⁴ “In addition, ‘Working Class Realism’ was as much a critical as it was a creative moment, denoting public language, a set of reference points and an interpretative framework, in which these texts were discussed and positioned in relation to wider debates about post-war change. In this sense, it can be compared to the moment of Anger, with which it clearly had affinities.” (Lacey 1995:72)

Northern domestic realism expresses itself across a range of media. This study is particularly concerned with the field of television drama, it being one of Bennett's main forms between the early nineteen seventies and the present. When he started producing for television, the main forum for the production of realist plays with social concerns was the *Play for Today/ Wednesday Play* slots on BBC. Domestic realism also influenced other genres, such as the series. The most notable and long-running example is the ITV series *Coronation Street*, first created in 1961. Not only did (and does) it make working class realism accessible to a mass audience, it also includes elements often absent from stage working class drama, for example "the stress on women and the strength of women, and the perspective of nostalgia" (Dyer et al 1981:4, quoted in Lacey 1995:76). Familiarity leads to audiences' identification with protagonists whose concerns, problems and, importantly, language they shared.

Bennett's forms of production are too diverse to confine him to northern domestic realism. O'Mealy (2001:xiv) also comments that "to see Bennett as merely an old-fashioned realist is also to underestimate the protean nature of his gifts and his appeal." Bennett's television texts should, however, be seen as originating in the social and domestic realist tradition.

Stephen Lacey (in Creeber 2001:3) suggests a 'checklist' for determining the nature of television drama, consisting of character types, setting, iconography, narrative and style. Through these protocols it is possible to determine degrees and stylistic varieties within realism. The main factors that determine the realistic nature of Bennett's television plays are seen to be the following:

Through the character types they portray, television plays often relate to the lives of their intended audiences. Realism in art attempts to represent real life, so that feelings of familiarity are evoked. In Bennett's television plays, characters display a recognisable register of speech. Audiences always comment that they know someone who sounds like a Bennett protagonist, although the way characters speak is sometimes associated with the past. The reason for this authenticity is that it rests on meticulous linguistic

observation on Bennett's part, complemented by lifelong actual experience of the type of character he is portraying.

Salad's on a new footing now, apparently,' Mam said, looking at her copy of *Ideal Home*. 'It doesn't just have to be lettuce and tomato and a slice of boiled egg. They eat celery with apple now and you can put raisins in if you want. All the boundaries are coming down.' (*Tales*:66)

'Feisty' women often feature in the plays. British realist television has a distinctive tradition of memorable female characters (see also Lay 2002:16), with examples ranging from the young and underprivileged (*Cathy Come Home*) to the straight-talking, fearless matriarch (Vera Duckworth in *Coronation Street*, for example). As shown above, Alan Bennett has created his own specimens of women within this tradition, often straight from his own Northern childhood. Men seldom dominate the action, or do much of the talking in Bennett's television plays, just as they were generally silent in his family and social environment.

Bennett's television plays are set in a recognisable period. Examples are the 1970s Polytechnic interiors of *Me, I'm Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, and the juxtaposition of the way old people dress and newer fashion, worn by younger generations, underlining the out-of-date quality of the older generation, often the focus in plays such as *Sunset Across the Bay*.

The plays often have a recognisable location. Representations of the North had great significance in the rise of social/domestic realism (see also Lacey 1995:78 and 80.) Character and place are nearly always interconnected (Lay 2002:8/9) With few exceptions, Bennett's exterior locations show the 'grimy', run-down North of England; uninspiring, darkly-coloured inner cities, wrecked by 1960s progressive architecture. The local industries had already collapsed or were on the brink of doing so in the 1970s, the sooty remnants were still visible on the buildings, with areas brutally cut up by ring road developments. Alternatively, we are shown dull suburban environments with identical houses, but without a sense of community. Interior locations are chosen in the same 'humdrum' spirit. Alan Bennett comments ironically:

If I have a favourite, imaginary landscape it seems to be an empty corridor. These are not comfortable facts for a writer in middle life to have to face. [...] However, in this quest for the universal I'm cheered to find that three of these plays take place in hospital, another in a cemetery and one in both. (*Objects*:7)

Bennett's television plays generally do not idealise the present, and attempt not to idealise the past. The latter is sometimes unsuccessful, as audiences' memories are activated through Bennett's evocation of the past, and therefore a lot of idealisation happens in the *reception* of the works. Nelson (1997:2-3) quotes Schroder (1992) in saying that

[...] the text itself has no existence, no life, and therefore no quality until it is deciphered by an individual and triggers the meaning potential carried by this individual. Whatever criteria one wishes to set up for quality, therefore, must be applied not to the text itself, but to the readings actualized by the text in the audience members.

Some of the plays also display a sense of 'moral realism'.

From the documentary movement, through free cinema, to the mid-1990s, British social realist texts have been propelled to varying degrees by a mission, ideal or goal. Within the text this can, in Andrew Higson's view, manifest itself as a kind of 'moral realism' (Lay 2002:10)

This expression seems apt as a prefix for a large number of Bennett's television plays. 'Moral realism' is not bound exclusively to northern plays, although it is most clearly extractable from them: two of the early plays, *Green Forms* and *A Visit from Miss Protheroe*, for example, insinuate clear moral statements, concerning the survival of the individual employee in a large faceless organisation. Equally, the central point of *Talking Heads I* and *II*, reminds us that 'attention must be paid' to people with sometimes boring and sometimes troubled lives. This could easily turn to a dogmatic evocation of guilt, but all Bennett does is show details of characters' lives and their self-delusion, encouraging the audience to see the world through their eyes.

The diegesis of a narrative is its entire created world. The audience's suspension of disbelief before entering a fictional world entails an acceptance of a story's diegesis. Bennett's earlier television work shows a high degree of linguistic and visual familiarity

and thus a narrative space in which the viewer can easily suspend disbelief. This changes considerably when it comes to the ‘watershed’ of *Talking Heads* in 1988.

Critics have argued¹⁵ that there are three developments that hamper the intended effects of social realism: the neglect of the political in favour of the private, the increasing influence of autobiography and a tendency to recreate the past through the eyes of the protagonist.

the move from public to private, political to personal, narrows the vision to such an extent that the wider structural inequalities not just regionally or nationally, but globally, are lost from the frame [...] (Clifford and King 2002:n.pag)

Some of Bennett’s texts explore the subjectivities of their central protagonists through a recreation of the past. In this respect it could be argued that they offer a nostalgic alternative to, for example, the heritage film in British cinema. Looking back instead of considering the contemporary settings from a highly individuated perspective can be seen as further undermining a sense of the ‘public’. (Lay 2002:19)

Lay’s three ‘accusations’ can be applied to Alan Bennett to a certain extent. However, it is debatable whether Bennett neglects the political in favour of the personal. Scarr (1996) argues that Bennett’s political argumentation actually becomes valid through its application to the individual, and its effect on the playwright himself. Certainly his writing lacks *direct* aggression and unmistakable links to contemporary party politics. Bennett’s underlying anger at, for example, Margaret Thatcher’s re-election expresses itself in statements like “Governments come and go. Or don’t go.” (HMQ, *A Question of Attribution*). But generally, these references are not topical, and his plays show inarticulate characters trying to cope with difficulties brought on by governments or bureaucracies. The helplessness of silenced characters can, of course, be read as political, but is generally not seen in this way, as the characteristics linked with Alan Bennett probably prevent an unbiased reception. I would argue that Bennett’s early works are in the wider mode of social realism, without insisting on linearity of timelines and occasionally employing techniques such as the flashback or –forward, or the voice over. *Intensive Care* (1982) has a dream section that

¹⁵ See Lay 2002:14 – 19 for a summary of critical views on realist representation.

can easily be interpreted as the protagonist’s subconscious recreation of his childhood relationship with his parents, brought on by his father’s imminent death. *Me, I’m Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1978) has a voice-over commentary, a narrator, who validates and contextualises the actions of Hopkins, the protagonist, and also verbalises what he thinks, but cannot say.

Wendy:	I think when one is married
Narrator: (voice over)	She meant “we”.
Wendy:	And I don’t mean “we” [...].
	(<i>Writer:66</i>)

This is one of Bennett’s first departures from the diegetic mode. In a move away from seamless realism,¹⁶ the text is opened up to self-referentiality, a device used in nearly all Bennett’s later works. If an increasing autobiographical influence and a tendency to draw from the past can be seen to hamper ‘proper’ realism, then Bennett has certainly moved away from the convention in the last ten years. *Talking Heads I* in 1988 constitutes a definite formal departure from previous works. Realism has not been abandoned, but shows less connection with the social realist conventions in which his earlier works could be seen. The increasingly autobiographical works that follow *Talking Heads I* take up this momentum of a modified realism, and the convention becomes one that is juxtaposed with others. This leads to hybrid forms, such as *The Lady in the Van*, where the dialogue is still written in realist fashion, but the boundaries of the diegetic scenario are nonetheless challenged through non-realist interventions. While *The Lady in the Van* has been accepted as a departure from Bennett’s well-established style, earlier works that departed from the audience’s expectations of the playwright failed critically and commercially. *The Old Crowd* (1978) and *Enjoy* (a stage play, 1980)¹⁷ are examples of this.

3.3) Bennett’s Persona

Bennett’s long-term collaborator and friend, Stephen Frears, has remarked that it is easy to forget that Bennett was not always the uncontroversial family favourite many people see him as today. Within the BBC, he was not regarded as part of the mainstream:

¹⁶ Samantha Lay (2002:8) sees television drama in its earlier days as utilising a ‘kind’ of realism which did not draw attention to the illusionist techniques it employed to produce a ‘reality effect’. calling this ‘seamless realism’.

¹⁷ For a discussion of *Enjoy* and its relationship with northern realism, see chapter 4).

Alan at the time would have been regarded - because the ethos was rather left wing – as a rather dangerous eccentric. He [...] wasn't ostensibly a left wing writer. Because he was so clever, you could see that people could not attack him in a way they might have attacked other people.¹⁸

Having acquired an edge of political controversy through *Beyond the Fringe*, in the mid-1960s Bennett wrote a television series, *On the Margin*, which prompted angry viewers' responses on several occasions. Even though Bennett is still prone to addressing controversy, as in the *Talking Heads II* monologue about a paedophile, *Playing Sandwiches*, he is not seen as someone who provokes. His characters are thought to have moved with him into the 'safe' category – little old ladies are just one example. What may have started as a dissection of mainly unflattering characteristics has now turned into accurate, but overall affectionate portraits from the past. The 'typical' inhabitants of Bennettland share their author's fate of being considered more harmless and one-dimensional than they actually are.

Bennett's artistic persona thus seems to mirror both the qualities and the insecurities that are seen as central to the English character. Yet he has been critically undervalued for not being fashionable, described, for example, as an "anomaly" (Bull 1994:10) amongst contemporary playwrights, serving to enforce a safe concern with the past and writing to reinforce the political status quo (the "whimper of continuing decline", Bull 1994:11). Apart from his classification as apolitical and provincial, another reason for Bennett's problematic relationship with the critics may be his active courting of audience popularity. Bennett respects but also fears his public's reaction to his work. He gives the example of "sabre-toothed pensioners" warning him outside a theatre that his work "had better be good [...] We're big fans of yours."¹⁹

The shy, cycle-clipped neurotic with an accent that gravitates between Oxford and Leeds is the foundation on which Bennett develops contradictions. It gives him the freedom to

¹⁸ Interview with Kara McKechnie, London, Dec. 31 2002.

¹⁹ "Alan Bennett gives a personal view of 25 years of the National on the South Bank", <http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/platforms/Alan_Bennett_NT25_article.html>

accommodate his being in two minds. Bennett's political 'colour', for example, is difficult to pin down. In the 1970s he described himself as "politically left-wing but socially right wing" (Carpenter 2001:22).²⁰ This self-assessment is one of the keys to understanding Bennett, who wrote against Thatcherism, refused to condemn the Cambridge Spies as traitors, turned down an honorary doctorate from Oxford because of the creation of the Rupert Murdoch Chair, but is the Chairman of the Settle Conservation Society and has made a passionate protest against the replacement of The Book of Common Prayer in *Writing Home*. Nicholas de Jongh (1990) remarks that Bennett may lack party political punch, but "there's no missing his political and social courage". *Getting On* (1971), for example, is a play about the scheming duality of a Labour MP, and effectively a critique of Harold Wilson's government. Seeking an alternative in the SDP in the 1980s, Bennett's hatred of the Thatcher government drove him to disowning his Englishness at the invasion of Port Stanley: "this is just where I happen to have been put down. No country. No party. No Church. No voice." (WH:168). Margaret Thatcher's re-election in 1983 made him "spit blood". This anger has found its way into his works, especially the season of television plays, *Objects of Affection* (1982) and *The Madness of George III* (1991), where William Pitt the Younger is presented as an early propagator of Thatcherism. The fear of expressing strong opinions without being in two minds about them betrays a certain timidity on the validity of Bennett's political opinions, which is of course sensed by those critics who see him as apolitical. Bennett remarks on the way his popularity and his ambiguity seem to produce a political void: "An article on playwrights in the *Daily Mail*, listed according to Hard Left, Soft Left, Hard Right, Soft Right and Centre. I am not listed. I should probably come under Soft Centre." (WH:117) Bennett seems to be a Labour traditionalist, displaying beliefs in social welfare and in 'fair shares for all', but at the same time showing respect for Queen and Church, associated more with reformist socialism.

Being seen as a 'flaxen-haired Northern lad' means a kind of safety for Bennett, and the freedom to fill his 'unfashionable' writing with subversive twists. This does not mean that his voice is limited, but that he will get away with more than most. The reception of his work is influenced by his "National Treasure" persona, meaning that his work is often considered more cosy and nice than it actually is. Despite shying away from rejection and

²⁰ Games (2001:2) describes Bennett as "politically liberal, architecturally conservative".

wanting to please, Bennett is always trying to fight ‘niceness’. “It can’t just be being nice. Nice is so dull”, as one of the two Alan Bennetts remarks in *The Lady in the Van* (28). Audiences will not register the use of swearwords, graphic language, or think of murderers or paedophiles in connection with Bennett. Yet most of his plays approach dangerous subjects, both thematically and linguistically.

Bennett’s documentaries are examples of the interaction between his persona and his ongoing exploration of aspects of Englishness. His profile means he is ideally suited for this convincing transmission of ‘fact’. Although he is seen as an authority, he is not perceived as patronising. He is able to maintain a ‘one of us’ appeal. In theatrical terms, this could be described as deliberately playing low status to maintain the favour of the audience. Although his documentaries are well researched and supported by a critical framework, Bennett is aware of the target audience and thus approaches his topics from a populist perspective, obviously with viewers with different levels of knowledge in mind. As discussed in section 5, Bennett is wary of the intimidation created by the elitist constructs of ‘Art’ and ‘Literature’. His own approach stresses that Bennett positions himself as on a par with the reader.

Given their carefully crafted scripts, their topics centred around English identity and public institutions and monuments, Bennett’s documentaries might be seen in the “it’s-good-for-you’ tradition of the BBC, ‘the long and distinguished tradition of public service broadcasting’ (Creeber 2001:125). Jonathan Stedall, director of *Dinner at Noon*, *Portrait or Bust* and *The Abbey*, mentioned in a 1998 interview that the next documentary planned was on the public library service, a project that never came to fruition. The choice of topic, however, shows that Bennett seems to want to remind the viewer of the significance of the public sphere, funding for arts and education and issues of public accountability. Tradition, acknowledgement of the past, close observation of local specificities are also dominant themes in Bennett’s plays, but they have a more educational and ‘caring’ and accessible character in the documentaries. Bennett’s insistence on parochialism and local specificity, which has made him invisible to critics of television drama, is ironically the key to his success in the documentaries, where he can be seen to be educating the public, in the ‘worthwhile’ tradition of the BBC. Two of

the documentaries (*Dinner at Noon* and *Portrait or Bust*) also focus on human behaviour, particularly on the relationship between seeming and being. In analysing his own and other people's behaviour in public places, such as hotels and art galleries, Bennett contributes to his ongoing exploration of what it means to be English.

In many of his works for stage and television, Bennett shows the gap between appearance and reality, creating a climate of parochial subversion. The Bennett women are much ridiculed, and instantly recognisable. The audience's pleasure in knowing somebody who speaks and acts just like the person on stage creates expectations, which are gradually reversed. The world of respectable ladies is a place where freedom can be felt only in prison (*A Lady of Letters*); old people talk about sexual repression (*Waiting for the Telegram*) and supposedly nicely spoken middle aged women offer special services to foot fetishists. The case of Miss Fozzard can be applied to the larger picture: Bennett's northern portraits and Bennett's supposedly 'cuddly' persona initially fulfil expectations, but behind the façade lurks subversion, anger and sadness. Both the work and the persona invite the audience to closely observe and reconsider the familiar. As Gillian Reynolds (2000) puts it:

Think of lime pickle, or a teddy bear stuffed with rusty wire, or how ice burns your hands. Alan Bennett is not what he is often mistaken for. Because he has spectacles and a floppy fringe of hair he is assumed to be cuddly. [...] Bennett's work never stops telling us he is angry, melancholy, scornful, doubtful. (21)

In summary, there is a well-defined image of Bennett the person and the author who exists in the mind of his audience and critics. His work explores a highly distinctive take on the nature of Englishness and what is behind the so-called respectability of the northern lower middle class.

4) Forms, Genres and Themes in Alan Bennett's Works

This section gives an overview of forms, themes and genres employed in Alan Bennett's writing. It looks at relationships between forms and the media they are written for, exploring the medium-specific qualities of themes and issues, with emphasis on developments in theatre and in television. In order to consider Bennett's particular generic and formal 'hallmarks', one must dispense with the idea of pure genres.¹ Within literature, work is classified and labelled in retrospect by a critical establishment. Within popular writing and film and television production, where writing is commissioned, a particular genre and its requirements have more importance. However, due to his popularity and the marketability of his name, Alan Bennett's writing is not aligned with a generic matrix. The breaking of generic conventions, even within the genre-oriented media film and television, does not seem to affect Bennett's popularity; a proof of his auteurist status within British cultural life.² In an unobtrusive way, Bennett has produced formally innovative works during his career: he has, for example, made a contribution to the form of the monologue, has injected autobiographical content into forms not traditionally associated with life writing, and has made valid contributions to the genres of history play and film, proving the 'connectability' of histories past and contemporary. Bennett's use of form and genre is highly individual. An erudite writer, he eludes formal conventions in his writing, which emerges as a process of continuous experimentation, both in terms of genres and the media they are produced for. Bennett's persona has emerged as the centre of his works, and the genres he creates serve as vehicles for his presentation of himself.

Many [critics] harbour the Romantic ideology of the primacy of authorial 'originality' and 'vision', emphasizing individual style and artistic 'self-expression'. In this tradition the artist (in any medium) is seen as breaking the mould of convention. (Chandler 2000:9)

¹ For a discussion of genre-theory, see Chapter 2.2.

² See below for a discussion of Bennett as a television auteur.

4.1) Stage

In theatre, he's moved from form to form,
never quite settling. (Eyre 2000:326)

It is widely agreed (Turner 1997, Eyre 2000, Dick 1996 et al.) that there is a very clear divide in Bennett's work: stage work is set in predominantly southern environments, and the ideas expressed are not directly connected to Bennett's Yorkshire roots, but located more in those surroundings he inhabited after he 'moved south'. Bennett has always had the ability to write in different registers and different genres within the same period. Therefore, when he was writing 'southern' plays such as *Forty Years On* (1968), *Getting On* (1971) or *Habeas Corpus* (1973), he was simultaneously producing work for television in the 'northern' mode, such as *A Day Out* (1972) and *Sunset Across the Bay* (1975).

With the exception of *Enjoy*, all texts originally written for the stage³ represent Bennett's southern, educated voice. There seems to be a preference to produce for the stage in this 'southern' mode of writing. It is difficult to find *formally* unifying, systematically evolving factors in Bennett's body of work for the stage. His work does not conform to trends followed by those playwrights who are his contemporaries, and there is no 'typical' Bennett stage play, as there might be said to be a typical Bennett television play. His voice is as recognisable in his works for the stage as it is in other media, but generically almost every play is an exploration of a different dramatic convention. Bennett's first play, *Forty Years On* (1968), is a 'hotchpotch' of styles and conventions, with elements of history play, revue with a sequence of sketches, and meta-theatre, a play within a play, with an audience on stage being watched by a 'real' audience. It combines styles and genres Bennett was exposed to at this time: history (through his studies at Oxford), sketches (through his sitcom, *On the Margin*, in the mid-1960s) and revue (through *Beyond the Fringe*). In the following stage works, Bennett employs a wide range of forms with no discernible

³ *Talking Heads*, for example, was originally written for television, and first transferred to the stage four years after it was broadcast.

evolution, and subjects covering an equally wide range. In some cases, it is possible to trace areas of interest or unresolved questions as the source of a play in Bennett's published diaries, *Writing Home*.⁴ The subsequent plays, *Getting On* (1971) and *The Old Country* (1977), fit into 1970s conventions of realism (although *not* working class realism)⁵, and explore ideas relating to public discussions of the time – the disappointment of the left with the Labour Party, and the question of what constitutes treachery of one's country. *Habeas Corpus* (1973) is a radical departure from anything that was written by Bennett previously: "an attempt to write a farce without the paraphernalia of farce" (*Plays* 1:17), exploring questions surrounding the permissive society and combining music hall songs with slapstick farce routines. Alec Guinness, who starred in *Habeas Corpus*' first production, describes the resulting formal pastiche:

I suspect he [Bennett] would be a bit tetchy if I described the play as a farce but it has all the ingredients of a farce. But it's also like a kind of restoration play, some of it goes into doggerel verse and rhyming couplets. It is unlike anything I've ever been connected with before. The form is rather odd, but it is very funny indeed in places. (Guinness 1994:221)

Enjoy (1980) builds on realist conventions, only to turn them into a play that has touches of Absurdist drama (see also O'Mealy 2001:34; Turner 1997:14-16). When looked at in isolation, from *within* Bennett's works for the stage, *Enjoy* departs from previous 'southern' texts in that it is set in the North of England amongst ordinary people. Looking for conforming works outside the stage plays is only marginally helpful, because *Enjoy* is also very different from all previous northern television plays. It bewildered audiences and critics in 1980 because the absurdist plot and Bennett's acerbic criticism of the environment he came from were unexpected (and seen as out of character) and, for audiences and critics, unwelcome. *Enjoy* satirises northern realism and sees the familiar Bennettian templates of ordinary folk exposed as mere performers, trying to be as 'typical' as possible. Although the north has never had a particularly romanticised treatment in Bennett's works, he previously always seemed to be attached and loyal to the environment he originated

⁴ See also the more extensive discussion on Bennett's diaries and prefaces in Chapter 6).

⁵ See also Chapter 3.

from. *Enjoy* deconstructs this impression, although from a position of ‘insideness’, with almost Ortonesque ruthlessness.

Despite these departures from northern realism, *Enjoy* does not break with the diegetic continuum of the world that is created. Even when Mam and Dad’s back-to-back terrace house is dismantled in order to preserve it for heritage purposes, this happens in the world that Bennett has set up for the characters. Conveniently, Bennett has provided us with a work that shows *Enjoy* without the pointedly absurdist, meta-theatrical ingredients: the television play *Say Something Happened* (in *Objects*, see below) is thematically very similar to *Enjoy*, but is formally more ‘typical’ of how Bennett has generally represented northern, parochial matters. Daphne Turner (1997:16) argues that Bennett’s presentation of the North as ‘fake’ in *Enjoy* is a symptom of his own disillusionment with it, and a realisation of the staying power of destructive northern clichés. Hence, Turner comments, the northern plays stopped in 1982 with the television play *Intensive Care*. I would argue, however, that, while the northern landscape is less prominent in works of the late 1980s and thereafter, the northern idiom has remained one of the main forms of expression in Bennett’s plays (in the *Talking Heads* monologues, for example). With characteristic ambivalence, Bennett embraces his northernness, but refuses to be too ‘typical’ by continuing to parody romanticised perceptions of the North, as he demonstrates in “The Pit and its Pithfalls”:

When I die, I don’t want to be buried in Ibiza; I shall want to be buried here beside my Auntie Cissie Turner, who kept us all out of six bob a week. Mind you, six bob was six bob in them days. You could buy three pennyworth of chips and still have change from sixpence.

We were all miners in all our family. My father was a miner. My mother is a miner. These are miner’s hands. But we were all artists, I suppose, really. But I was the first to one who had this urge to express myself on paper rather than at the coalface. But under the skin, I suppose, I’m still a miner. I suppose, in a very real sense, I’m a miner writer. (*WH*:590)

The absurdist influence in *Enjoy* is also detectable in Bennett’s next play, *Kafka’s Dick* (1986). It shares with *Enjoy* characteristics of the farce, but combines them with

biographically oriented drama, although it is not ‘factual’ authenticity Bennett is pursuing in his exploration of Franz Kafka (see also Chapter 5).⁶ The play could be described as a farcical, stylised biography of a writer, with a sceptical message about the dangers of biography.

It is interesting to see how Bennett’s three plays with farcical conventions – *Habeas Corpus*, *Enjoy* and *Kafka’s Dick* - differ from each other through their added generic ingredients, elements as diverse as music hall, Northern realism or black comedy and absurdist conventions.

In his next two theatre projects, Bennett was working ‘to order’. Both *The Madness of George III* (1991) and *The Wind in the Willows* (1992) were commissioned or supported in production by the National Theatre. The former is a history play, which can be read as both a parable on contemporary British politics and a study in family psychology. The latter is an adaptation of Kenneth Grahame’s children’s book for the stage, a Christmas family show with musical numbers, preserving the pastoral elements of the novel. By this time, Bennett had also started transforming his works for other media. From a psychologically poignant history drama on stage, *George III* underwent a transformation to large-scale costume film, for example (see 4.3 below).

The spy plays (*An Englishman Abroad* and *A Question of Attribution*) seem to form a stylistic unity when presented as a double bill on stage, but the two originate in different media: *An Englishman Abroad* was first conceived as television drama (1983), and then adapted for the stage to pair with *A Question of Attribution* in 1987. The latter was then adapted as a television drama. *Englishman* is quite closely based on a real story, and therefore has a certain documentary quality, even when adapted for the stage from its original television format. *Question* only takes the real case it is based on as a departure point and presents a parable pointing to the similarities between concealment in humans

⁶ Bennett’s extensive research on Kafka also generated a television play, *The Insurance Man*, discussed below, and briefly in Chapter 5).

(spying) and forgery in art. On stage, both plays present their case in a style that could be termed realism with components of self-referentiality and hints that allusions are being made to the audience's extra-textual knowledge. Critics (Eyre 2000 and O'Mealy 2001, for example) have linked the plays on spies with the plays on writers, as all can be connected through Bennett's continuing interest in the notion of a secret self – a theme that has become more centred on his own presentation of self in recent years. As an author who has explored notion of 'Englishness', Bennett also considers the concept of treachery through the spy-plays (to which should be added the 1977 play *The Old Country*). Apart from the politics surrounding the Cambridge Spies, Bennett's interest in treachery might be linked with his status as one who has 'defected' from his native environment, and feels guilty about betraying his roots. His writing technique can be considered as a form of spying, based on observation and eavesdropping, while preserving his own, secret self.

Bennett's latest play, *The Lady in the Van* (*Van*; 1999) seems a startling formal departure from other works for the theatre. It is the first stage play after a nine years of Bennett producing work mainly for the screen, and, occasionally, for *The London Review of Books*. *Van* veers between realism, interior autobiographical monologue, extra-diegetic narrative and detective story. It is the most formally complex of Bennett's plays. Former boundaries of North and South become blurred, personified by two characters from Bennett's two lives – 'Miss Shepherd' and 'Mam'. All Bennett's 'Mam' characters carry obvious connections with Bennett's late mother, and have until now been rooted in northern works on ordinary people, whereas eccentrics like the deluded bag lady Miss Shepherd have inhabited the realm of the 'southern' works. The two characters in the play signify the breaking down of this threshold. In *Van*, Mam, Miss Shepherd and particularly the two personifications of Alan Bennett on stage open up an autobiographical discourse which covers both Bennett's northern and southern identities. Little surprise, then, that *Van* can best be categorised as 'generic anarchism'. Autobiographical, biographical, realist and surrealist conventions dominate the play in turn. In spring 2004, Bennett and Nicholas Hytner, director of three Bennett plays, are preparing a new play, *The History Boys*, for production at the National Theatre. It seems to be a similar play to *Forty Years On*, in that it unites Bennett's careers

as historian and as playwright for the stage, and examines “insistent questions about history and how you teach it; about education and its purpose”.⁷

This chronological listing has made clear that there are certain elements which Bennett’s plays have in common, but that there is no formal line of development from one dominant form to another. Instead, there is a rather eclectic mixture (often a mixture even within a play text) – of generic categories such as revue, farce, history drama, autobiographical drama or adaptation. This suggests that Bennett is trying to match the form to the content in his works for the stage. There is no sense of arriving at a winning formula, as there is in Bennett’s television work: with the format of *Talking Heads*, Bennett created a form considered highly suitable to his voice as a television writer. Here, the formal development is directed towards increasing simplicity, whereas in stage works there is a sense of Bennett taking on as many conventions as will fit into any one play. Many of Bennett’s contemporaries (Ayckbourn, Pinter, Hare, for example) have one form they will return to for many of their plays. Bennett has one of the most distinctive voices amongst British playwrights, but a formally and generically diverse repertory. Bennett is perhaps comparable to playwrights such as Michael Frayn, who not only writes in many different forms for the stage, but also produces other genres, such as prose fiction. Tom Stoppard is another contemporary who has an identifiable voice, but no fixed form or genre, and who produces work for stage, film and television. Bennett and Stoppard are also similar in that they regularly portray ‘real’ historical characters, often writers, in their works, but make no claim for the authenticity of their portrayal. *Travesties* (Stoppard 1972) imagines a scenario where Joyce meets Tristan Tzara meets Lenin meets the characters from *The Importance of Being Earnest*; Bennett’s *Kafka’s Dick* sees Franz Kafka and Max Brod invade a Leeds suburban household, mixing the farcical plot with themes from Kafka’s novels. Stoppard’s *The Coast of Utopia* (2002) examines the history of Russian revolutionaries; Bennett’s *The Madness of George III* unfolds against the historical background of the American war of Independence, and the transition from a nominal to a democratically functional English parliament.

⁷ The National Theatre website, accessed 23 February 2004, <www.nt-online.org/?lid=7785>

Bennett has stated that he finds it difficult to meet the expectations made on a contemporary British playwright and that he often finds himself inhibited by what and how he *should* be writing. Rather than suffering the anxiety of influence described by Harold Bloom (1975), Bennett suffers from the anxiety that he is not displaying *sufficient* influence. It is noteworthy, however, that this insecurity is not detectable in his works, which seem to be written out of a spirit of formal independence. Instead of passing himself off as a free spirit among playwrights Bennett has always displayed considerable discomfort having to 'follow on' from other writers (see Chapter 5).

4.2) Television

On my own subjective scale writing for the theatre comes first, feature films second and television (whether film or tape) last. This is partly because at the moment I find television easiest to write, theatre well nigh impossible and feature films (or grown-up films as I tend to think of them) somewhere in between. But the scale has more to do with the permanence of the various forms. A theatre play, once put on, will normally get into print and so can be read and reproduced. A feature film, once shown in the cinema, starts out on its career and has a history, a life. A BBC television film has no history. It is an incident, with luck an occasion, the bait for the writer a nationwide audience and his work a topic of general discussion the next day. (Bennett in Hassan et al 1984:121)

Bennett's artistic development within the medium of television has meant that his life and his origins provide an increasingly large part of the material. Forms and genres evolve in a more linear and 'orderly' way than they do in his stage works. Initially, Bennett's development often seems to coincide with trends of various periods in television production. Subsequently, in becoming a television 'brand' in his own right, Bennett has invented his own forms and, due to huge audience appeal, does not have to conform to the restrictions of programmers' or audience's expectations.

In considering developments in Bennett's television work, we return to the North – South divide introduced at the beginning of this section. With only one exception – *Enjoy* – northern matters have been reserved for the television screen. Bennett has stated that

geography determined form and medium in his work for a long time. North mostly equalled realism, written for television in Bennett's 'original' voice because he appreciated the lower critical status of television drama, as he pointed out in an interview for *Time Out*:

[...] when I'm writing for TV it doesn't feel as though I'm going to be marked on it in the same way as I am with theatre. (Bennett in Anty 1984:13)

The lower critical status of television drama compared to stage plays seems to have provided a sanctuary for Bennett, in which he could write in the "internal voice [he] hear[s] most clearly" (Anty 1984:13), and focus on the observation of ordinary people's speech and behaviour. Despite expressing insecurity about being 'marked' on his work, Bennett's writing for television has always seemed more sure-footed and confident in its form and content than has his work for the stage. Bennett's confidence might be boosted by material he is thoroughly familiar with through his upbringing and ongoing connection with the North of England. As mentioned in the previous section, the stage plays are explorations of questions Bennett is 'in two minds' about. Their source material thus seems to be determined by education and (especially historical) research.

The division between stage – south - and television – north - in Bennett's work⁸ became less 'tidy' in the late 1980s than it had been previously, with the emergence of plays for television in other registers. *The Insurance Man* (Richard Eyre, 1987) and *102 Boulevard Haussmann* (Udayan Prasad, 1991) are explorations of the lives of Franz Kafka and Marcel Proust, for example.⁹ The picture is changed further by Bennett's development towards autobiography as his dominant form of expression: this obviously blurs the borderlines between the northern and the southern Bennett, as his persona carries allusions to both.

There is a certain medium-specific tradition which Bennett's work for television responds to (if not conforms to), for which the following provides an evolutionary overview.

⁸ See Turner 1997:3-16 for a comprehensive comparison between Bennett's northern and southern landscapes, which are also 'landscapes of the mind'.

⁹ See also Chapter 5.

4.2.1) Trends in Television Drama

With the emerging form of plays written specifically for television, the late 1950s saw a shift in emphasis. Until then, studio productions of classic plays or adaptations of novels had been the main mode of production. Television drama originated from theatrical conventions of the period, and its propagators had the aim of bringing new plays to a wider audience.¹⁰ The initiative of Sydney Newman established the first regular slot for television drama on ITV: *Armchair Theatre*, which started in 1958 and was considered a pioneering drama strand. The BBC's weekly drama slot, *The Wednesday Play* (1964 - 1970) and its successor, *Play for Today* (1970 - 1984), featured new plays by contemporary playwrights and developed a reputation for innovation and controversy.

In the early days of the genre, the single play was the main form of production.

In comparison with the series, the format of single play places fewer obligations on the writer; there is no need to continue a storyline, write to serve the strengths of actors already involved in the series or to cater to specific environments. Initially at least, a playwright of a single play is not weighed down by precedent, as a single play can be looked at in isolation and offers a prime canvas for developing talents, as has been argued by critics and television practitioners of that period, such as the writer Alan Plater:

What we had in the 'Golden Age' was what Dennis Norden once called 'a place to be lousy in', a quiet, underpopulated, underpublicised corner where you could learn the trade on and in gentle stages without metropolitan controllers breathing down the producer's neck, and without, praise be, smartarse postmodernist critics from the Groucho Club saying we should have our fingers broken. (Plater in Bignell et al 2000:71)

Many single plays were being produced within a relatively new genre – the combination of its newness and the idealism surrounding the period has since closely linked discussions of the golden age and its prime form, the single play. Although topics were diverse, the slot quickly gained a reputation for confronting societal and social issues of some controversy.

¹⁰ For a detailed account on the early age of television drama, see Bignell et al 2000 and Caughie 2000.

Unconventional in content, it generally embraced the formal – admittedly vaguely defined – outlines of social realism,¹¹ attributed with the following functions:

To represent social experience that has hitherto been largely underrepresented within dominant forms of post-war drama is to validate that experience, to argue that it is worthy of interest in itself and to remedy a significant absence. (Lacey 1995:74)

Subjects within single plays of the ‘Golden Age’ can be linked to conventions of social realism, whereas the style often has characteristics of theatrical realism. This stands in contrast to what Hayward (quoted in Lay 2002:8) terms ‘seamless realism’ which does not draw attention to its own illusion.¹²

The political and cultural climate during the 1980s was a decisive factor in the decline of the single television play. The medium had established itself as a vehicle for asking awkward social questions, not always welcomed by funding bodies, in their turn dependent on government approval. With the television market becoming more competitive, potential ratings dominated over other considerations, such as innovation and artistic boundaries. The series or the serial offered a far more cost-effective way of building up and maintaining audiences (see also Brandt 1992:15; Self 1984:3) Until fairly recently, single play had become a rarity in programming schedules.¹³ If single plays are commissioned and produced, the traditions of social realism are often reinvoked: in the 2002 BBC1 production *The Stretford Wives* (Peter Webber, 2002), style and content fit into this tradition. A tale of three working class sisters, it shows northern women constantly abused and let down by men and battling through a life that has never offered them any opportunities. Similar to productions like *A Taste of Honey* (Tony Richardson, 1961), establishing shots are of industrial surroundings and shabby back-to-back terraces, action taking place in the rain or

¹¹ See Chapter 3 for a discussion of realism in Bennett’s television works. For a general discussion of realism and possible definitions in the field of drama, see Lacey (1995), Chapter 3 “Realism, Class and Culture”, p. 63 ff.

¹² See also Chapter 3 for a discussion on domestic or social realism in relation to Bennett’s television work.

¹³ In 2003-2004, there seems to be a modest ‘comeback’ of the single play in a variety of conventions. Many of these plays are written in the tradition of social intervention (*May 33*, BBC1, April 2004, for example, a play about a young woman suffering from multiple personality disorder as a result of childhood abuse).

the dark. In a self-referential reminder of 1960s kitchen sink drama, Rita Tushingham, who played the pregnant daughter of a semi-whore in *A Taste of Honey*, is cast as the mother of the three sisters in *The Stretford Wives*.

The developing genre of the single play in its earlier stages offered stylistic and thematic innovations, but also a fair amount of mediocre work. It must, however, be acknowledged that there were more opportunities for writers not yet established, and more willingness to invest in ‘one off’ single plays, which obviously did not have the economic potential of the series, the form that was to dominate from the 1970s. Those critical of the gradual disappearance of the single play (see for example Bignell 2000) therefore mourn the decrease in opportunity and variety as well as the loss of quality.

In the next stage of evolution, plays were then often produced in seasons, a platform for authors who had acquired a certain ‘name’. Through the natural selection process of the single play, commissioners of drama spotted television authors with potential and audience appeal. Their work would then be showcased in a season of their work, loosely programmed sequentially. The plays were often not directly linked with each other, but were connected through the stylistic and thematic characteristics of one writer, sometimes from different stages of his/ her career. ‘Seasons’ are not exclusive to television: in the theatre or in art house cinemas, seasons will often be programmed to give the audience a sense of continuity and coherence.¹⁴ In television, seasons enable the audience to gain a wider impression of one writer’s work and voice, and links are thus often made between the work and the life of an artist. Dennis Potter’s 1976 season of 3 plays (*Brimstone & Treacle*, *Where Adam Stood*, *Double Dare*) serves as an example. Potter stated it was “not a formal trilogy” (Cook 1998:92), but conceded that all three plays “occupy the same territory” (ibid) and should therefore be seen together. Which is why, when *Brimstone & Treacle* was banned by BBC Executives three weeks before its transmission, Potter did his utmost to prevent the screening of the other two plays.

¹⁴ West Yorkshire Playhouse’s 2000 season of plays by JB Priestley is one example; the Leicester Phoenix cinema’s 2002 season of contemporary Iranian films another.

The drama series, together with the serial, has the dominant form of television drama since the 1980s. Creeber (2001:35) defines the series as “those shows whose characteristics are recycled, but the story concludes in each individual episode. [...] A series is thus similar to an anthology of short stories.” As well as being considerably cheaper to produce than the single play, it could be argued that the series successfully exploits the fundamental dynamics of television consumption. While the series and continuous serial are often equated with the lower end of the quality divide, the mini-series (finite, whereas the series can have a very long life span) has frequently achieved a higher cultural status (Creeber 2001:37-38). Brandt (1993:6) calls this a “change in the balance of TV drama programming during the eighties”. Like the single play, a mini-series is often marketed around the name of its writer (Lynda La Plante’s *Prime Suspect*, Stephen Poliakoff’s *The Lost Prince*), delivering the prestige of authorship seldom attributed to the series or soap opera.

Again, the example of Dennis Potter shows how a television auteur’s career developed alongside changing formats, something that is also true of Alan Bennett. Potter was one of the writers regularly contributing single plays for the *Play for Today* slot, production slowed down in the 1970s, and after 1979, Potter did not contribute any more single plays for the BBC. Frustrated that a “generation of second-rate bureaucrats” was “leading the BBC down from the heights” (Cook 1998:100), Potter predicted the decline of the single play: the hated bureaucrats were not only prioritising money over creativity and innovation, but were also imposing their, in Potter’s eyes, narrow moral parameters on television drama. He predicted that everything would be produced on film, transforming the television play into a director’s medium (ibid).

Whereas the season showcased the work of one writer, not demanding a link between the works shown, the mini-series (and its ‘successor’, the long running drama series) is a story told in instalments. It might also have a more episodic character, with self-contained stories told in the same format. The single play, or the individual plays within a season, are not necessarily linked to each other, and are consequently more flexible formats for auteurs.

The mini-series means that continuing plots or formal criteria have to be adhered to, and links will normally have to be created between instalments. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the series increasingly became the favoured format among commissioners of television drama.¹⁵ This had economic reasons, but also documented a tendency towards less experimentation, and a general move towards “the reassuring predictability of the drama series [which] could quickly build up a large and loyal audience” (Creeber 2001:12). This audience made them more cost-effective and more certain to achieve high ratings.

Television drama in its earlier days, especially work produced in *The Wednesday Play* and *Play for Today* slots, was seen as a “natural symbol for social commentators who wish to criticise the apparent ‘dumbing down’ of contemporary television, presenting it (somewhat nostalgically) as representative of a ‘Golden Age’ when television was, in their view, still interested in challenging its audience’s views and expectations”. (Creeber 2001:9) Critics such as Robin Nelson (1997) and John Caughie (2000) point out that it is inappropriate to idealise the golden age. Plays such as *Cathy Come Home* (Ken Loach, 1966) exemplify the values attached to television drama of that age. Its significance to television drama is comparable to that of *Look Back in Anger* for post war British Theatre in 1956. Caughie (2000) argues that the single play in the style of social realism was a descendant of the theatre of the angry young men, via the ‘bypass’ of the short lived New Wave in British cinema, 1959 - 1963. After the dispersion of its leading figures, the politicised, realist mission was carried on by television drama. Ken Loach’s plays, for instance, combine the accessible (both through seeing familiar character types and the medium of television) and the political and constituted, as Barry Hanson (Bignell 2000:59) states, “a line in the sand”. Hanson describes *Cathy Come Home*, a story about social workers taking a child away from a homeless young mother as “the first dramatic political statement on television in terms of form and content [...] The previous major political statement on television had been the Coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953”.

¹⁵ Series refers to those shows whose characteristics and settings are recycled, but the story concludes in each individual episode. By contrast, in a serial the story and discourse do not come to a conclusion during an episode, and the threads are picked up again after a hiatus. A series is thus similar to an anthology of short stories, while a serial is like a serialized Victorian Novel. (Creeber 2000:35)

[...] the impact of *Up the Junction* and *Cathy Come Home* may have had as much to do with the way they were taken up in public and press discourses within a particular historical moment as it had to do with their form. (MacMurrough-Kavanagh, quoted in Caughie 2000:108)

It is only natural that, in following theatrical conventions, especially those post-1956, the format of the single play should have dominated the production of television drama for so long.

This short overview demonstrates a certain evolution – single play to series, and certain hierarchies of cultural value – the ‘radical’ single play, carrying the notion of cultural seriousness (see also Caughie 1980) and the commercially driven series. The latter should be seen as a tendency rather than as the norm. Alan Bennett’s development within the medium of television, however, roughly fits into this evolution. He is also a typical example of the author as auteur, for the writer “as the one and only originator of the television play” (Self 1984:70).

4.2.2) Bennett as a television auteur

In her study on the works of Stephen Frears, Helga Bechmann (1997:21-22) summarises the origins and the nature of auteurism: Francois Truffaut published an article in the journal *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1954, criticising the subordination of the film director to the supremacy of the writer within mainstream cinema (called, with a certain irony, ‘cinema de qualité’ by Truffaut). He saw this as supporting a reactionary attitude, stalling the progress of filmic means of expression, and influencing the viewing habits of the audience. When, according to Truffaut, literary narrative techniques were replaced by film-specific ones, viewers found it difficult to understand these new ways of storytelling. Truffaut’s main ambition within the quest for auteurism was that films should not be judged simply by their literary value, but mainly by standards of their ‘mise en scène’ (literally ‘putting into scene’), their filmic direction (from ‘directing’). Confusingly, Truffaut then distinguishes between two types of directors, the ‘metteur en scene’ and the ‘auteur’. While he proclaims the supremacy of the ‘mise en scène’, he judges the ‘metteur en scene’ type of director to

be the inferior in comparison with the auteur, who is deemed to be more involved with the film conceptually, or even doubling up as the writer. Truffaut calls this distinctive visual and aesthetic personal style the 'écriture' of a director, which is highly recognisable throughout his/ her oeuvre. Bechmann describes the auteur-theory as more of a political and philosophical attitude than as a theory, noting that the judgement of the political and aesthetic values of a filmic product lay mainly with writers associated with the *Cahiers du Cinema*, thus necessarily subjective and biased.

In short, if you ask what characterizes an auteur, what makes a filmmaker an auteur, in the strong sense of the term, you fall into a new trap: it's his style, in other words, the *mise en scene*, a notion as dangerously risky, infinitely variable and impossible to pin down as auteur... *Mise en scene* means two things, one obvious - the directing process; the other mysterious - the result of that process... (Comolli (1965:8))¹⁶

The auteur and the author are thus often not identical: in film (where the term 'auteur' originates), it is the director who is the defining creative force. An auteur seems to be associated with a particular plot or core content, and produces variations of that in his/her work. Within film, Alfred Hitchcock and Stephen Spielberg, for example, produce work that is easily identifiable as theirs by plot, content and shooting style. Within theatre, the auteur is generally the writer, although developments like the German 'Regietheater' (directors' theatre) in the 1970s and 1980s have tried to challenge this dominance. Television drama developed from theatrical origins, and, accordingly, the writer is still very much the auteur, seen as the 'hallmark' of a television play, whereas the director will be the subordinate 'realiser' of the text. It is the writer, not the director, whose name will be used to sell the plays to the public and who will be measured against previous work.

[...] the television playwright very much came to be regarded as the 'artist' and was given relative creative freedom by the institution to pick his or her theme and express an 'idea' (though always subject to ultimate veto from senior management, in terms of constantly shifting guidelines of public taste, decency or offence). (Cook 1998:4)

¹⁶ Quoted from Hodson (1990), accessed Oct. 20 2003,
<<http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/5.2/Hodson.html>>

If a film has a single maker, then it is much easier to accept it as 'Art'. That acceptance also makes it worthy of academic and critical study. Is it too cynical to suggest that critics who advance the auteur theory do so out of a vested interest. For similar reasons there is a desire to preserve the status of the writer as the one and only originator of the television play. (Self 1984:70)

It is another characteristic of auteurism that the creative products of one auteur often prompt the audience's "desire to relate (...) themes to the individual's autobiography" (Ros Coward in Stam & Miller 2000:12). It is an established way of reading the creator of a novel, a poem, a stage play or a short story. Although attempts might be made to divorce author and text (see, for example, Chapter 5), readers and critics seem to gravitate naturally towards personalised readings, i.e. they measure the life against the work and seek connections.

Within this study, the concept of auteurism offers a key to the understanding of Bennett's development, and is therefore expanded beyond its original confines of film. Auteurism rests on the notion of a work of art being conceived by a 'single maker', and this is the way Bennett's work, especially for television, has come to be perceived. Although this study argues for Bennett as an auteur in all the genres and media he writes for, this status is most evident within his work for television. As explained above, television drama takes the notion of the writer as the 'begetter' of a play from its theatrical antecedents. The television play, or more specifically the single play, has been seen as "the respectable end of television" (Caughie 2000:2) for its 'high culture' origins.

Lindsay Anderson has expressed discontentment with television drama being "traditionally and emphatically a writer's rather than a director's medium" (Preface to *The Old Crowd*, *The Writer in Disguise*:163). Within the field of television, Dennis Potter and Alan Bennett are perhaps the strongest examples for the connection between biography and auteurism, but writers like Jimmy McGovern and Stephen Poliakoff are also read in the contexts of their lives and often their origins.

Both the creative and increasingly the biographical centre of his television works, Alan Bennett is a classic example of a television auteur. He has a recognisable and distinctive

voice and develops recurring themes and preoccupations, as well as suggesting strong links between life and art. Possibly in a quest to minimise commissioner's involvement, Bennett's last two major productions, *Talking Heads II* (1998) and *Telling Tales* (2000), have been produced by the company he and Mark Shivas founded, Slow Motion. This name appears to be chosen to signal unhurried, quality-driven production methods, not responding to the pace the industry imposes. Bennett and Shivas are joint Executive directors of the production company, Shivas taking the role of Producer and Bennett that of Executive Producer within the production process. In *Telling Tales*, Bennett's roles therefore consist of writer, performer, and Executive Producer. The increase in Bennett's artistic control (together with reduction of forms, as will be seen) has meant more restricted possibilities for his collaborators. Starting from being 'just' the writer, Bennett acquires other roles throughout his career in television: actor, director, co-producer and finally, Executive Producer, making him what Tony Garnett (Bignell et al. 2000:14) calls "the power centre" of his plays, in terms of decision-making and creativity. Bennett has used his creative control to enhance the distinctiveness of his productions. When defining what constitutes this 'Bennettian' distinctiveness, the two main pointers seem to be language and style, as discussed in Chapter 3.

Following the evolution of television drama formats discussed above, the developments of Bennett's work closely follow those of the market: in the 1970s, his main output were single plays. Once he became more of a name in television, several single plays were grouped together in 'seasons'. Finally, he arrived at the format of mini-series with *Talking Heads I* in the late 1980s, and has produced several of these to date. The following provides a brief review of the formal developments in Bennett's work, some of which will be discussed in depth later in the thesis.

A Day Out (Stephen Frears, 1971) and *Sunset Across the Bay* (Stephen Frears, 1975) are Bennett's first plays for television. Both follow the 'rules' of the single play as far as they are realist pieces of writing and filming, and they are about the lives of unremarkable people. But, unlike the majority of single plays of the period, it is difficult to see the two

texts as descendants of the stage play. Both plays are filmed entirely on location, and do not follow theatrical conventions. It could therefore be said that Bennett, in entering the medium of television drama, sidestepped the dominant (although not the only) mode of production in the 1970s: that of the studio-bound setting, with artificial lighting and box sets (see also Cook 1998:5). It can be said that Bennett did not initially participate in what Caughie calls an “astonishing formal conservatism” (in Cook 1998:5), thus putting a further question mark over critics’ assessment of *Bennett* as conservative. Undoubtedly, the fact that Bennett was already a well-known public figure when he started writing television drama gave him greater power to negotiate budgets and conditions for productions that he might not have been granted as an unknown.

Both *A Day Out* and *Sunset Across the Bay* feature their characters’ failure to articulate feelings and to generally express themselves; it would be inappropriate to construct them as dominated by dialogue. This might be seen as another departure from contemporary television plays. In both plays, the landscape and the social setting have a crucial part in the narrative, and the texts would become meaningless if shot in the studio. In *A Day Out*, set in 1911 and inspired by an old group photo of a cycling club, the audience knows the pastoral idyll of the West Yorkshire landscape is deceptive. The characters refer to the apparent stability of the surroundings, which has tinges of tragic irony for the audience, who know how much this landscape will change under the influence of World War I and the furious pace of industrialisation (see also Turner 1997:9). Bennett acts as “sympathetic historian” (O’Mealy 2001:21) to the members of a Halifax cycling club. The foreboding, a knowledge to which the audience alone is privy, carries the film, as the action consists merely of a cycling trip to Fountain’s Abbey, and back again. Stephen Frears comments on the simplicity of Bennett’s early plays for television:

Stephen Frears: A woman called Irene Shubik turned down *A Day Out*, saying it didn’t really go anywhere, and Bennett responded that it went to Fountain’s Abbey and back. [laughter] Do you mean they are slight? Yes, they were. You mean, slight as narratives?

Kara McKechnie: Yes. Is the emphasis more on interaction?

Stephen Frears: Interaction – that wasn't a word that had been invented in those days. [...] I know he [Bennett] wrote some work, and he was surprised how robust the characters were. [...] So I don't quite know where the emphasis lay, except that he'd had these little ideas for scenes, inspired by a photograph of a men's cycling club. There were these little exchanges, that was really all. The surprise was how things turned out, started turning out underneath, more complicated. [...] But not a great deal of interaction between the characters,

Kara McKechnie: Observation?

Stephen Frears: Yes, observation, and a sort of mode, and a sort of selection, a sort of selected taste. Things he [Bennett] chose to pick out.

In *Sunset Across the Bay*, Bennett accentuates the contrast between its two surroundings, Leeds and Morecambe. Mam and Dad's retirement from 'mucky old Leeds' to a flat in Morecambe turns out to increase their displacement in a world that had already ceased to be theirs. Open, empty frames and long silences interrupted by nondescript, repetitive dialogue mirror the prospect of an empty life ahead for Mam and Dad. Dialogue becomes secondary in these two plays; at the centre is the relationship between a figure and a landscape

Stylistically, Bennett's next works for television, the two short plays *Office Suite* (*Green Forms* and *A Visit from Miss Protheroe*), conform to the studio-shot, dialogue dominated format of many contemporary single plays. Together, the plays almost constitute a mini-season, although their plots and characters are not directly linked. The two plays could be part of an episodically constructed film, with characters existing close to each other, without mutual awareness, but with similar social and professional backgrounds. Doris and Doreen, Mr Dodsworth and Miss Protheroe are the ancestors of the characters whose 'dull lives' Bennett later examined under a magnifying glass in *Talking Heads*. Again, these texts do not conform to politicised, 'agitational' demands of the single play, because they make their point indirectly: *Green Forms* raises the threat of redundancy, but has a firm focus on the long-established office routine of Doris and Doreen. *A Visit from Miss Protheroe* is the portrait of a woman turned bitter because her surroundings deny her any significance. She uses her frustration to ensure that other people are as miserable as she.

This is of course caused by a work environment, a microcosm, which mirrors a macrocosm in which the individual is powerless and unimportant. Bennett returns to this theme time and again in his television work, often with the focus on an ‘unfashionable’ generation.

Bennett returned to the form of the single play in the 1980s. Both *The Insurance Man* and *102 Boulevard Haussmann* are very different from their 1970s predecessors. First of all, they are not Northern texts, and do not carry the obligation of ‘gritty’ realism or domestic drama. *The Insurance Man*, although inspired by a real writer’s biography, is a nightmarish, surrealist, visually-driven work. Because of its visual rather than verbal references to kafkaesque scenarios it sits awkwardly within the stylistic conventions of British television drama. *102 Boulevard Haussmann* is also an imaginary story about the private life of a ‘real’ author (Marcel Proust). Again, it is an exercise in the recreation of an atmosphere associated with a writer’s works, but without any direct reference to these works. Formally, *Haussmann* is more of a chamber play than *Insurance Man*, but it is still very far removed from Bennett’s realist, ‘worthy’ texts of the 1970s.

Bennett’s first season of television plays, *The Writer in Disguise* (*Writer* hereafter), contains five plays, several of them linked through the similarity of their protagonists, to the writer referred to in the overall title refers.¹⁷ Bennett and his collaborators, Stephen Frears and Lindsay Anderson, produced the season for LWT in 1978/79. This was Bennett’s first departure from the BBC, although he took up the relationship again in the early 1980s. He has, since the late 1970s, not been ‘faithful’ to any one commissioning agency, making his choices according to who offers the best conditions for him to maintain maximum artistic control. The plays’ narratives in the *Writer* season are not related as such, and they do not depend on each other for understanding, but they show unity in style and in type of character. Four of the plays combine qualities of location-shot drama of the earlier plays with the domesticity and ‘humdrum’ realism displayed in *Office Suite*. Behind the

¹⁷ The writer in disguise, and its relationship to the Bennett-persona, is discussed in Chapters 6 and 7.

ordinary façade lurk twisted tales of human repression and isolation.¹⁸ There are tentative small departures from the dominant realist mode. Characters often speak in a slightly heightened style, which can border on the parodic, and features non-sequiturs, ensuring dialogue is often comic even when the content is not. The dominating theme of *Talking Heads*, self deception of which the viewer is aware but the protagonist is not, also starts to emerge in the late 1970s.

One play in this season can be seen as the odd one out: *The Old Crowd*, directed by Lindsay Anderson, the script edited by Anderson and Bennett together. *The Old Crowd* is Bennett's only play which might have met with critical acclaim under the 'Golden Age' criteria, although it was not produced for the *Play for Today* slot. Although unusual in its departure from the predominant realist style, the play might have been deemed avant-garde and 'different' (the only alternative to domestic realism), and its director Lindsay Anderson certainly had radical credibility. As Bennett and Frears commented in an edition of the *South Bank Show* (1979), the play has "no plot, no beginning, no end"¹⁹ and is acted in a style that sometimes seems to parody Brecht's epic style, and sometimes makes references to surrealist films like *Un Chien Andalou* (Luis Bunuel). Bennett's starting point, he comments, was the image of an empty house with the sound of a piano tuner, and the contemporary strike of lorry drivers, which partly explains the empty space in which *The Old Crowd* is set.

In Bennett's next season, this time for the BBC, six plays were grouped together under the title *Objects of Affection* (1982). Characters are predominantly middle-aged or elderly, they are disillusioned and disappointed by their inability to 'live!'. Some of the plays deal with alienation and the breakdown of loyalties within a family. Meaning is normally not placed within the characters' speech, which is proof of their difficulty in expressing themselves, but within the subtext of reactions, silences and visual signifiers. Bennett has developed

¹⁸ For readings of plays from the *Objects* season, see Turner 1997, Part 3, Wolfe 1999, Chapter 6 and O'Mealy 2001, Chapter 3.

¹⁹ This refers to the demands of drama traditionalists (voiced, for example, in letters to the *Radio Times*): 'I like a play to have a beginning, middle and end.'

themes over a long time in different media and different contexts, taking the time to look at them from different angles and perspectives. *Objects* is no exception.

As the content of his work, always biographically *inspired*, moved closer towards autobiographical material, Bennett's involvement in the production process also increased (see section on auteurism above). These two overall linear developments are complemented by a third: that of ongoing reduction of form, which is not mirrored by Bennett's works for the stage. Plays such as *A Day Out* (1972) are 'group portraits', plays in the late 1970s and 1980s tend to be 'family portraits'. Within the season of *Objects*, Bennett arrived at the form of the 'portrait' of a single person: the monologue. *A Woman of No Importance* was the first television monologue Bennett wrote, and, although content and characters underwent changes in subsequent monologues, he has essentially kept to a similar form and structure in the two *Talking Heads* series. The monologue has been the dominant form in Bennett's television work since the late 1980s.

Talking Heads I turned Bennett into a brand and can be seen as his contribution to the preferred format of late 1980s television drama: the mini-series. It is, however, not suggested that Bennett deliberately offered to conform to commissioners' preferred form of production. However, he seems to have found the perfect form suited to telling the stories of unspectacular people from their own perspective, and this happened to suit the favourable climate for such mini-series. *Talking Heads I* fitted into developments in television drama in the 1980s, a decade called 'oppressively reactionary' (Bignell et al. 2000:1) in its approach to innovative television drama. Although *formally* innovative, *Talking Heads* fits into an age concerned with the creation of brands and the recreation of familiar formats, and has lent itself to marketing outside the broadcast medium. The monologues are cheap to produce and keep the risk of failure to a minimum. They are straightforward, if restrictive, to direct. Bennett's recognisable style and language ensure familiarity, even though the form is at first new. It is accessible, though, and every one of the six monologues is constructed in exactly the same way. The character types, taken from life, are similar to those that have populated Bennett's television work for a long time.

Talking Heads is 'pure' Bennett, without the frills of location or relationships between different characters. The pieces are direct, to the point, unornamented, and seem to have been made for the market that the author has already established. Both series are marketed around Bennett's appeal, in a classic 'auteurist' fashion, comparable to Potter and the mini-series *The Singing Detective*, or Stephen Poliakoff's *Shooting the Past*.

Through its success with audiences and readers, *Talking Heads I* presented a breakthrough for Bennett, and the effect on commissioning agencies was that Bennett was given free reign to develop any work he wanted. Given his 'family favourite' status, audiences and agencies alike always expressed the wish for more variation on the same format, or new episodes. Bennett confirms the pressure to repeat a winning formula in the preface to *Talking Heads II*: "The success of the first series made this lot harder to write." (CTH:121). The television critics' and the audience's reception generally focused more on the individual performances than on formal matters, and this has meant that the monologues have not been sufficiently recognised as the innovative works they undoubtedly are. It is for this reason that *Talking Heads* have been chosen as a 'case study', a detailed discussion of their formal composition, to make the case for Bennett as an innovator, albeit an innovator who denies his own inventiveness (see below '*Talking Heads* – Reinventing the Monologue')

In his next project for television in 2000, *Telling Tales*, Bennett presents yet another hybrid form, the template of which seems to match his thematic and narrative concerns. The series comprises ten monologues, as told by Bennett himself. The visual conventions are very close to those of *Talking Heads I* and *II*: a single 'talking head' – Bennett himself, addressing the camera. Sequences generally start in midshot, moving into close up at very gradual pace. Unlike *Talking Heads*, the narrative is not based on gradual revelation of a duality of a character's story. This is an exercise in densely detailed autobiographical confessions and reminiscences, grouped thematically rather than chronologically.

Tales displays similar formal influences to those discussed in the *Talking Heads* section below, although they are applied in different measures. The form of *Tales* is less plot-

based, less theatrically driven, but just as protagonist-centred as the *Talking Heads* monologues. The technique of taking a 'snapshot' and developing it into a narrative, associated with the medium of short story, can also be found in *Tales*, the blurb on the front cover of the published scripts even calling them "Ten childhood snapshots from the master of the monologue". The generic classification for *Tales* is again difficult: conventions can be assigned to different genres such as the monologue (albeit conventions defined by Bennett himself through *Talking Heads*), the documentary and storytelling, something that has all but disappeared from the television screen.²⁰ The success and increasing public adoration of Bennett mean that he simply writes his own rules of genre. *Tales* concludes the development from single play to mini-series. Due to their documentary content, if not their form, the autobiographical monologues can be seen as transitional between Bennett's modes of playwriting and documentary.

The documentary in its many variations (docusoap, 'mockumentary', docudrama) is among the most rapidly expanding programming choices. The British preoccupation with biography and 'factuality' has resulted in an expansion of 'Reality TV', a trend that has its roots in documentaries centring on the depiction of 'true stories' and 'real people'. Reality TV and documentaries often rely on celebrity presentation: names such as David Attenborough and Simon Shama stand for a certain predictable style, and a certain level of quality. The regular suppliers of voice-overs for documentaries, normally well-established actors or presenters, are similar signifiers of reliability and quality, thus ideal for the communication of factuality. There is normally a trustworthy, serious, but still benign quality to either the (visible) presenters or the voice-overs, making it easy for the viewer to suspend disbelief and to buy into the 'promise of fact' (see also Paget 1990:3). Documentaries are presented as 'factual' and are equipped with the appropriate conventions to provide authenticity. Although all documentaries fronted by a presenter are to some extent auteurist, we do not expect a wildlife-documentary, for example, to contain as much information about David Attenborough's childhood as about the life cycles of antarctic

²⁰ See Chapter 8 for a narratological discussion of *Telling Tales*, which draws connections between the monologues and Bennett's documentaries.

penguins. Bennett's documentaries therefore might raise the expectation of being exclusively 'about' the theme they announce themselves to be about: behaviour in hotels, the works and lives of twentieth century British poets, the Leeds City Art Gallery and Westminster Abbey. All four documentaries are, however, 'hybrids': although well-researched and informative about their topics, they are about Bennett's life *in relation to* these topics.

Bennett's first documentary, *Dinner at Noon* (Jonathan Stedall, BBC TV, 1988), is an exploration of behaviour in public places, in this case a hotel. It includes reflections on Bennett's childhood and cultivates his shy, observant and embarrassed persona. *Poetry in Motion* (Channel 4 TV, 1990) is an introduction to the lives and works of British poets of the twentieth century, selected, contextualised and read by Bennett. *Portrait or Bust* (Jonathan Stedall, BBC TV, 1994) is an exploration of the Leeds Art Gallery and, starting with Bennett's childhood, his relationship with fine art. *The Abbey* (Jonathan Stedall, BBC TV, 1995) is a three part documentary on the history of Westminster Abbey. Bennett brings less of his persona into *The Abbey* than he chooses to in his other documentaries.

The documentaries are another example of how all Bennett's forms are at least partly autobiographical discourses, and can often be seen to accommodate Bennett's autobiographical material and his historical and sociological interests. As these works are not easy to categorise, one has to give them new names, sometimes fairly long-winded ones. Daphne Turner (1997:133) calls what I have simply called 'the Bennett-documentaries' "semi-autobiographical television documentary". It can, of course, be argued, that Bennett's persona on screen will personalise or 'auteurise' any work, no matter what the intention. *Dinner at Noon*, broadcast in 1988, was one of the first times Bennett performed himself on screen, without the protective layer of fictionality or disguise.²¹ It can therefore be assumed that Bennett was consciously allowing the duality of theme and life.

²¹ There is a different development with regard to prefaces and introductions, which is discussed in Chapter 6.

4.3) Film

The three film scripts Bennett has written (*Prick Up Your Ears* (Stephen Frears, 1986), *A Private Function* (Malcolm Mowbray, 1987), *The Madness of King George* (Nicholas Hytner, 1994)) differ considerably, and display formal diversity and stylistic variety, similar to the generic range of Bennett's stage works. Did Bennett the auteur, present in nearly all his texts, have to give up his status to the film directors with whom he collaborated? Traditionally, the auteurist primacy is the writers' in works for stage and television, and belongs to the director within film. Did Bennett's collaborations with film directors therefore present a battle of the auteurs, for the more distinctive hallmark? In general, one could describe the three projects as compromises at different levels. Bennett's voice is always identifiable, as is his distinctive rhythm of speech, and as are the jokes. Visually, the films demonstrate the three directors' diversity in style and approach, although none of the three collaborating directors can strictly be described as an auteur.

The films have a relatively modest common denominator in that they are all works which embrace realist principles, not breaking with the diegetic world the narrative sets up. Two out of the three films are based on the lives of real characters, while the other is concerned with a very specific historical time. They are, however, not of the most 'prestigious' kind of realism, where the impression of an unmediated portrait of real life is given – the films are seamless in their realism, but not obviously politically fuelled. Preference is instead given to dramaturgical coherence and to the 'needs' of the narrative. Bennett's competence as a historian and (particularly in the case of *The Madness of King George*) as an art historian is evident in all three films, demonstrated not only by the precision of his research, but also by his description of visual detail in the published shooting script.

The two main generic labels which can be applied to *Prick Up Your Ears* are those of 'adaptation' and 'biopic'. The film can also be grouped with Bennett's works on other writers (Kafka, Larkin and Proust being the others) and the implications and thematic recurrences are discussed in Chapter 5. Bennett adapted the script from John Lahr's biography of Joe Orton of the same title, which was in its turn based on Orton's diaries,

also edited by Lahr. This was Bennett's first large-screen collaboration with Stephen Frears and the outcome could be described as shared auteurship. Frears comments that he sees himself largely as the interpreter of a writer's work:

I'm useless unless the script is very good [...] I like them [the scriptwriters] there the whole time. It's just one big conversation.²²

A Private Function can be classed both as a comedy and as a period film, accurately reproducing the context of post-war Britain on the eve of the Royal Wedding in 1947. Visually, *A Private Function* may have qualities associated with heritage film aesthetics,²³ but overall, it has more in common with the Ealing Comedies of the late 1940s. This is consistent with its subject matter: a 'small' man comes up against the provincial powers and, through his wife's hunger for social status, is driven to crime and subversion. *A Private Function* is shot with a lot of attention to period detail, incorporating newsreel-footage, for example. It illustrates the context of post-war food deprivation and the battle for social status. The film's script always stays on the comic or satirical side, and the dialogue, also comparable to Ealing Comedies, is written in a slightly mannered style. The emphasis seems to be on the satirical portrayal of societal hierarchy and social aspirations in a small northern town.

Like *Prick Up Your Ears*, which is based on Lahr's biography, *The Madness of King George* is adapted from a different medium, Bennett's stage play, *The Madness of George III*. But whereas the Orton biopic is adapted from another writer's work, *King George* is Bennett's 'textual recycling' of his own work. Turner calls it a tragi-comedy (1997:86), and, in the widest collection of generic possibilities, *King George* can also be seen as a costume or period film with certain heritage conventions, as a biopic, or as a historical film based on 'factual' sources, as well as a case study of mental illness. Like Bennett's other two films, it is very faithful to the visual reproduction of the period it is set in, drawing from 18th Century portraits, landscape paintings and caricatures (Hogarth and

²² Stephen Frears, *This Morning*, BBC1, Nov. 6, 2002.

Gainsborough being the most likely inspirations). *King George* stays within its diegetic confines visually, but textual links made with contemporary politics and Royalty create an extra-diegetic innuendo with a ‘knowing’ audience.

The film is a collaboration between Bennett and director Nicholas Hytner, who had already developed the stage play together. They refer to the film as grounded in a non-competitive merging of ideas (see Wu 2000), which can be interpreted as a ‘sharing’ of the auteurist supremacy. It was Hytner’s first work for the large screen, and he and Bennett were accused of thinking mainly of pandering to an American audience in their adaptation of the stage play (see also O’Mealy 1999). But what is, with British arrogance, deemed an Americanisation was merely seen as an acknowledgement of the different needs of different media by Hytner and Bennett.

With *George III*, it immediately became apparent that you could either do everything, and make it the biggest pile of scenery ever seen on the London stage, or do nothing – so we did nothing. [The film version] was everything. Yes. Because that’s what films are. (Hytner in Wu 2000:101)

4.4) Prose

Bennett has also written prose fiction. His short stories, *The Clothes They Stood Up In* (1997), *Father! Father! Burning Bright!* (1999) and *The Laying on of Hands* (2001), were all produced for the *The London Review of Books*, each then published separately, and all three finally published together in 2003. In *Clothes* and *Laying On*, Bennett does not seem to foreground autobiographical concerns, as he does in other works from the same period.

The plot structure of a *Talking Heads* monologue is more similar to the structure of the ‘classic’ short story than Bennett’s *actual* short stories are.²⁴ *Clothes* begins with an unusual occurrence, the mysterious removal of the complete contents of a couple’s flat, and then concentrates on the effects of this event. The solution to the ‘crime’, when it comes at

²³ For a detailed overview on the continuing discussion on the (often derogatorily applied) label ‘Heritage film’, see Monk (2002).

²⁴ For further discussion on the influence of the short story on the monologues, see section 4.6 below.

the end of the story, has lost its importance. The liberation of the wife through the emptying of her life, first through the removal of her possessions, then through the death of her husband, has become the story's focus. It is told in the third person, but the narrator quite frequently seems to speak for the characters with confidence. There are also certain detective-story conventions, as well as slight parodic reminders of the *Bildungsroman*.

Father! can be seen as a bridge between the purely fictional and the completely personal. It has what could be termed 'autobiographical innuendo', not least because it does not stand on its own, but is an adaptation of Bennett's 1982 television play *Intensive Care*. Here, Bennett himself played the protagonist, providing interpreters with ammunition to make connections between life and work. The increasing concentration of 'life' in his texts will ensure any work's close examination for links and hints. The story tells of a son's attempt to make up for his troubled relationship with his father by being at his deathbed in hospital. The protagonist, Denis Midgley, is one of Bennett's silent and inhibited characters, who longs for liberation. This, with tragic irony, occurs at the moment of his father's death, when Midgley is having sex with a night nurse. While critics assumed that Bennett's own life had provided a template for the plot, Bennett comments (*WH*:166) that it was actually inspired by an event in the life of Gandhi, in which he tells of his father dying while he was having sex with his newly wed wife in a room next door.

Like *Clothes*, *The Laying on of Hands* is a multi-faceted story of gradual revelation. It takes place at the memorial service of a well-known 'masseur', who discreetly supplied other services to many people of both sexes, many of them 'in the public eye', and also including the vicar leading the 'celebration of Clive's life'. The story neatly incorporates Bennett's critique of popular culture: confessional chat shows, the vocabulary of New Labour, the lukewarm style of reformed Anglicanism, Classic FM, or people talking with an inflection that turns every sentence into a question. If Bennett accepted invitations such as the show *Room 101* (BBC 2),²⁵ he could simply compile his list from this short story. Nevertheless,

²⁵ A comic show where guests plead for despised phenomena and items to go into the room based on the chamber where nightmares become reality in Orwell's *1984*.

Laying On is also a discourse about the relationship between performer or chat show host (vicar) and his studio audience (the congregation). Furthermore, it includes observations on the notions of homosexual coming out and the nature of faith and spirituality in contemporary society, most acutely felt when the congregation are silently praying for the deceased, but are really giving thanks that he did not die of the 'wrong' disease, HIV-related.

'I elevate him,' thought a choreographer (for whom he had also made some shelves), 'a son of Job dancing before the Lord.'

'I dine him,' prayed one of the cooks, 'on quails stuffed with pears in a redcurrant coulis.'

'I adorn him,' imagined a fashion designer. 'I send him down the catwalk in chest-revealing tartan tunic and trews and sporting a tam o'shanter.'

'I appropriate him,' planned the publisher, 'a young man eaten alive by celebrity' (the dust-jacket Prometheus on the rock). (*Three Stories*:57)

It is another of Bennett's carefully structured and acutely observed piece of writing, which often incorporates startling juxtapositions.

Like much of Bennett's work, *Writing Home* (1994) combines the factual and the fictional. It cannot be labelled formally, though, as it is a collection comprising many different forms: its core is formed by Bennett's diaries between 1980 and 1990 (in later editions 'topped up' with three further years) and the diaries documenting the later life of Miss Shepherd, which would be the material for the play *The Lady in the Van*. *Writing Home* also contains essays, prefaces to plays, reviews and articles, most of them originally published in the *London Review of Books*. *Writing Home* can be categorised generically overall as autobiographical. It is the closest Bennett has come to producing an autobiography, as it is written mostly in the first person with the intention to inform about the author's life and career. There is a loose chronology of texts which were obviously all written at different times, but which are 'meaningfully' grouped together to illustrate a life and a career. *Writing Home* and its meaning as autobiographical text are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

4.5) Adaptation

Adaptation can be defined as a change made to a piece of work to make it suitable for a different environment or medium. Andrew Davies, currently the most successful adaptor in television drama, has likened adaptation to “asset stripping”, comparable to taking over a business and only keeping the profitable parts.²⁶

Alan Bennett has only adapted two works by other writers, *Prick Up Your Ears* and *The Wind in the Willows*, but the adaptations made of his own works to another medium have risen steadily. Since *Talking Heads I* (1988), virtually every work has gone through a transformation to another medium, sometimes to several. Bennett has often complained about his lack of aptitude for plots, and adapting already existing ones might seem less daunting. As shown above, Bennett has been producing work (especially for television) that is becoming formally more and more simple. As outlined below, this process started with the *Talking Heads* monologues and continued with *Tales*. The formal simplicity of these works puts the focus firmly on the protagonist and the content, resulting in the work not depending strongly on its medium. The ease with which Bennett’s works transfer to other media is connected to them being content and auteur driven. In this, it is of little importance whether the source is factual or fictional. The high number of adaptations Bennett has successfully worked on suggests his competence in producing work suitable for one medium, while being practitioner enough to realise which conventions are medium-specific.

The Clothes They Stood Up In originally appeared in the *London Review of Books*. Alan Bennett read the story for Radio 4 for Christmas 1997 and the subsequent BBC tape sold out immediately. (*Clothes*:cover blurb)

Bennett is the best-selling British playwright for audio books. Nearly all of his works, whether for the stage, for television or for journals (almost exclusively for the *London Review of Books*), have found their way onto tape or CD. Some critics have seen this as a confirmation of Bennett’s audience being mainly middle-aged to elderly – this is the

²⁶ *The South Bank Show* (on the work of Andrew Davies), ITV, Nov. 17, 2002.

generation of the radio play or talking book. Immensely popular in Britain between the 1930s and the 1960s, it is still a form that has a dedicated audience. The generic implications of a form created for a visual medium transferred to a purely aural medium are considerable. Again, there are normally no textual concessions made in this transition. In plays, the emphasis shifts to the narrative told through the text, and to the suggestive qualities of the actors' voices, and to the innuendo produced by pauses. Narrative fiction or diaries come alive in their transfer from page to tape, through Bennett's meticulous verbal composition, his characteristic inflection, and his carefully understated and timed humour.

Bennett has created new genres by merging ingredients from conventional forms of theatre, television or life writing. The following case study on *Talking Heads* demonstrates this by discussing how Bennett made the genre of the television monologue his own.

4.6) Case Study: *Talking Heads I and II*

Reinventing the Monologue

A new genre is always the transformation of one or several old genres. (Todorov in Chandler 2000:4)

The form of the monologue has been part of theatrical tradition for a very long time. The convention mainly existed as part of larger dramatic structures, ranging from a brief aside to a lengthy soliloquy. During the twentieth century, the monologue has emerged as a theatrical form of its own. The audiences' experience of monologues previous to *Talking Heads* mainly derived from the theatre, as a character expressing thoughts aloud, facing the audience, was generally not part of realist television drama or film at that time.²⁷

The *Talking Heads* monologues constitute Bennett's most widely known work for television. After the success of the first series in 1988, he wrote and co-produced a second

²⁷ It can be noted that the convention is used occasionally in contemporary television drama. Andrew Davis uses direct address in his adaptations, for example.

series in 1998. The plays are suitable 'vehicles' for well known actors (most of them with careers both on stage and screen). Some of the monologues were written specially for certain actors, such as *A Woman of No Importance*, *A Lady of Letters* and *Miss Fozzard Finds her Feet* for Patricia Routledge, and *A Cream Cracker Under the Settee* and *Waiting for the Telegram* for Thora Hird. Both series, and especially the second, generated a large amount of merchandise with continuing successful sales figures: videos, audiotapes, and scripts. The two series' scripts were published at the time of their first transmission, and *The Complete Talking Heads (CTH)* was published at the time of the transmission of the second series, in late 1998. The simultaneous availability of the monologues on screen and in print demonstrates confidence in their success. *Talking Heads* have continued to be highly successful in different adaptations, such as audio recordings and stage versions. The *Talking Heads* monologues are the product of many conventions moulded into a new form of monologue. *Talking Heads* transferred to the stage soon after they were broadcast. No textual changes were made. Actors and directors have to adapt the monologues to the needs of the stage environment by theatrical instinct. The narrative device of the face in close-up is obviously missing on stage, where the audience are normally a few metres away. On stage, the emphasis on words and especially silences has to 'fill in' for the missing intimacy between performer and viewer. There is a possible compensation through the 'liveness' of the event in the theatre; the presence of the audience contributing to the monologue and creating an ephemeral quality to each performance, the experience of which is obviously not possible in the television version.

The first series of *Talking Heads* was put on the 'A' Level syllabus in the early 1990s, ensuring young and diverse readers' familiarity with an author who is more often associated with middle-aged, middle-class audiences. As a consequence of *Talking Heads'* success, Bennett now dominates the market for the genre of monologue and all monologue plays, be they for stage or screen, are compared to his work. A steady stream of monologues in the *Talking Heads* style are sent to television production companies and producing theatres, and are mostly rejected because they are too similar to Bennett's

monologues. Alex Chisholm, Literary Manager of the West Yorkshire Playhouse,²⁸ admits that the market for monologues by other authors than Bennett is saturated. If monologues by other authors *do* go into production, critics normally complain either that the authors are imitating Bennett's voice, or that Bennett himself has better contributions to make to the genre. *Talking Heads* has proved to be a benchmark for the television monologue.

4.6.1) Talking Heads and Monologue Conventions

The monologues, although *formally* providing a radical shift from Bennett's previous work, employ well established thematic and linguistic patterns.²⁹

He [Bennett] allows us to overhear them saying what remains unspoken in their [the *Talking Heads* protagonists] fictional world, a world whose presence and pressures on the characters are convincingly included. Monologues by definition cannot use several defining features of drama: the interaction of characters, dialogue, the meeting and clashing of voices and points of view, the population of the world of the play by other characters. However, Bennett manages to create a detailed network of relationships for each *Talking Head* by means of reported conversations with others. (Turner 1997:59)

The monologues are formally simple, but generically complex. 'Talking Heads' is a phrase used to describe a talk-dominated, visually static programme or programme section on television, typically a news programme, or other formats associated with factuality broadcasting rather than drama. The choice of title, and also the fact that Bennett originally intended to call the monologues 'Dull Lives' (*CTH*, Intro) comes across as ironic insistence that the pieces are unspectacular and visually unexciting.

The talking head, says Bennett, is a synonym in television for boredom. But real television boredom happens (often in programmes that seem to be visually rich) when the word becomes a written lecture that carries the content and the pictures become no more than illustration. (Hunt in Brandt 1993:36)

²⁸ Conversation with Alex Chisholm, West Yorkshire Playhouse, March 2002.

²⁹ It is on these, rather than on questions of form and genre, that critics have focused. Academic works on Bennett (Turner 1997, Chapter 5; Wolfe 2000, Chapter 6, Hunt in Brandt 1993, Chapter 2) provide detailed readings of the *Talking Heads I* monologues. Hunt considers one of the monologues in the context of television genre. O'Mealy (2001), writing for the American undergraduate market, continues the trend of discussing aspects of theme and plot only for the second series.

As in many other cases, Bennett lowers expectations, leaving the viewer to realise that instead of dullness and simplicity, the monologues demonstrate the complexity, subtlety and formal innovation of his work. (see also Section 6, 'captatio benevolentiae'). The influences of various media are detectable, and the use of monologue can be traced to a variety of traditions, from Renaissance soliloquy to music hall comic monologue.

The monologue as an independent form has mainly been a feature of twentieth century literature, and often takes place by one actor impersonating or representing several characters. Alan Bennett calls the *Talking Heads* 'monologues' or 'monologue plays'. Delia Dick (1996) points out that the correct term would probably be 'monopolylogues', as the character re-enacts many others. On a basic level, a monologue is defined as "a literary device used to convey innermost thoughts and feelings of a character"³⁰. This definition leaves open whether the monologue is self-contained or part of a play, although the latter is more commonly referred to as a 'soliloquy'. Here, a character, alone on stage, voices thoughts too personal or too dangerous to convey to others, or consults with him/herself on a dilemma, expressing thoughts aloud. Dramaturgically, a soliloquy is often necessary in order to equip the audience with information necessary to their understanding of the plot, but cannot be heard by any other characters participating in a play. For the purpose of this study, a 'monologue' is defined as a self-contained piece of theatre, and a soliloquy as part of a larger framework.

Following Lacey's 'checklist' (see Chapter 3), *Talking Heads* conforms to many conventions of television drama in the 'domestic realist' mode already established above. The character types, the settings and the iconography are often modelled on ordinary people and places – although they do not actually exist, they easily could. The monologues have a certain documentary, mimetic quality. They deal with the lives of unspectacular people, but signal that these lives are worthy of being presented in such minute detail and that attention must be paid while these characters are placed centre-stage. Some of the characters are as trapped in their lives as many an Ibsen character, and there is a sense that the future will not

see them breaking free from their confines, imposed by habit, class, circumstance and fear of change. Some of the monologues reveal glimpses of what might be if restrictions disappeared. However, *Talking Heads*' kind of realism is considered to be different from the 'realisms' generally employed in Bennett's other work for television.

These [*Talking Heads*] are not naturalistic pieces but even plays that claim to be faithful accounts of ordinary life can seldom accommodate this garrulous intruder [a television set]. The world of everything that is the case is not the world of drama. (CTH:124)

Here, Bennett shows understanding of the genre's ambivalent relationship with realism, mainly due to its convention of a character speaking alone. According to Williams, the monologue is particularly clear in showing the paradox of realism in the theatre: wanting to represent life as accurately as possible, but being in an inescapably artificial situation for the purpose of doing so.³¹ Accordingly, Clemen (1972:148) points out, "the convention of the monologue with its lack of psychological probability and its artificiality has often been a stumbling block to critics". Gottsched, for example, remarked that "clever people do not speak aloud when they are alone".³² The setting of a soliloquy contradicts conventions of naturalism, but is often part of a play that has naturalistic characteristics. This is particularly evident in soliloquies in Shakespeare's plays, where soliloquies can have a range of different functions. The opening monologue in *Richard III*, for example, provides essential information for the audience, both within the exposition of the plot, and Richard Gloucester's own introduction of his character. This introduction also contains an element of self-exploration, but then moves towards the revelation of the protagonist's plans. Clemen (1972:153) states that "the plan laid open before us is a ready-made one, we are not present – as in later soliloquies – while it is hatched". While Richard is expressing thoughts

³⁰ 'Monologue' – Colliers Encyclopaedia

³¹ 'Not long ago, and perhaps still in some places, it was, however, thought very strange if a characters spoke in soliloquy, whether this was thought of as "thinking aloud" or "directly addressing the audience". The complaints would be that this was "artificial", or "not true to life", or even "undramatic"; yet it is surely as natural and as "true to life", when one is on a stage before a thousand people, to address them, as to pretend to carry on as if they were not there. As for the soliloquy being "undramatic", this is the kind of conditional statement, elevated into a "law", which continually confuses dramatic criticism, since it is well known that the soliloquy, in many periods, has been a normally accepted part of dramatic method.' (Williams 1968:14)

³² 'Kluge Leute aber pflegen nicht laut zu reden, wenn sie allein sind', quoted in Clemen (1972:148).

and character traits too private or dangerous for any other characters' ears, the protagonist still seems to be speaking and 'editing' for an extradiegetic audience. The performer seems to be conscious of this audience without making any reference to this consciousness. It is possible to see this convention in *Talking Heads*, where "thoughts and feelings of a character are conveyed" (Colliers Encyclopaedia). It is difficult to add 'innermost', however, as there is always the impression that the character is holding back some information, and 'editing' his or her narrative. As in the opening monologue of *Richard III*, the nature of the *Talking Heads* monologues will often be tailored towards self-presentation or -justification rather than self-revelation.

Given the monologue convention, then, the potentially dramatic material described above is distanced by the single narrating voice, who has already experienced it, worked it through, and frequently treats it with irony and humour. (Rose 1993:539)

Susan, the vicar's wife in *Bed Among the Lentils*, demonstrates this self-editing when telling about a lunch for the Bishop, where the subtext suggests she may be drunk:

[...] I ask Geoffrey how he thinks it's gone. Doesn't know. 'Fingers crossed,' I say. 'I think there are more constructive things we could do than that,' he says crisply, and goes off to mend his inner tube. I sit by the Aga for a bit and as I doze off it comes to me that by 'constructive things' he perhaps means prayer. (*CTH*:59)

The *Talking Heads* protagonist looks straight at the camera, and thus at the viewer, but the character does not refer to this, nor use any form of personal address. It is part of the repertoire of alienation techniques associated with Brecht's ideas for an epic theatre to address the audience directly. Yet it would be a misrepresentation to call *Talking Heads* 'epic' or 'anti-realist'. Bennett simply presents a mixture of conventions: the empathy associated with Aristotelian principles is combined with the analytical observation associated with Brechtian conventions.

The invisible viewer suggests a link with the poetic form of dramatic monologue, such as Browning's "My Last Duchess". Here, the speaker addresses a silent listener, whose

presence is referred to, and to whom the monologue is often addressed, but who otherwise does not take part in the narrative.

[...] a first-person speaker not the poet, a time and place, and auditor – revelation of character, colloquial language and some dramatic interaction between speaker and auditor. It may then seem that dramatic monologue is a truncated play. If the principal elements of drama are, as Aristotle said, plot and character, then dramatic monologue has very little plot and only one real character. (Sinfield 1977:3)

In comparison, some of the *Talking Heads* protagonists address someone, although this silent presence is normally not specified any further, for example in *Soldiering On* (TH I):

I wouldn't want you to think this was a tragic story (CTH: 105)

Apart from the possibility of the character performing for a viewer, the presentation to an undefined presence could also be a symptom of the characters' deep-rooted self-deception; and this is certainly how Bennett sees his own work:

They don't quite know what they are saying and are telling a story to the meaning of which they are not entirely privy. (CTH, Introduction:32)

Listeners (and possibly a comforting presence) nonetheless, the audience's judgement is of little consequence to the performer 'protected' by the fourth wall. Some of the information revealed to an invisible viewer would actually be dangerous or damaging to the character if it left the realm of the monologue, in keeping with the above definition of "too private or dangerous for any other characters' ears". Examples are Rosemary in *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* and Marjory in *The Outside Dog* (both *Talking Heads II*). Both women suspect their husbands as instigators or participators in a criminal act, and keep that information to themselves – and tell the story to an invisible viewer.

The form of interior monologue, sometimes called 'stream of consciousness' has characterised monologic writing, in novels from Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* to Joyce's *Ulysses*. This form of monologue typically foregrounds the inner thoughts and reactions of the character rather than the fictional plot, and often without regard to logical argument or

narrative sequence. The stream of consciousness reflects the forces, external and internal, influencing the mind of a character at a single moment.³³ In *Ulysses*, for example, the stylistic ambition seems to translate the actual process of thought and feeling into language in all its incoherence, messiness and complexity. A listener or an addressee is part of the structure from the point of view of the character whose consciousness is displayed. Some aspects of the *Talking Heads* monologues can be linked with this convention, especially when protagonists are observing characters or situations unseen to the audience. Mostly, this happens in retrospect and is therefore prone to ‘editing’, but sometimes observations will be communicated as they happen:

Doris: Don’t know anybody round here now. Folks opposite. I don’t know them. Used to be the Marsdens. Mr and Mrs Marsden and Yvonne, the funny daughter. There for years. Here before we were, the Marsdens. Then he died, and she died, and Yvonne went away somewhere. A home, I expect. (CTH:111)

Generally, the characters’ self-editing contradicts another monologue convention, that of indiscriminately disclosing thoughts as they arise within the convention of the stream of consciousness.

Most self-contained monologue plays seem to involve an invisible or visible, but largely passive, third party. It is therefore possible to link the monologue play and the dramatic monologue within poetry, for they share several characteristics in their mode of address. The following examples examine the position and the address of the narrator of a monologue or monologue play.

Harold Pinter’s *Monologue*, for example, starts with the stage direction ‘Man alone in a chair. He refers to another chair, which is empty’ (Pinter 1973:n.pag.). Throughout, the monologue is addressed to an absent friend from the speaker’s past, giving every indication that this addressee is firmly believed to be present. Unlike stage soliloquies, self-contained

³³ The phrase ‘stream of consciousness’ to indicate the flow of inner experience was first used by William James in *Principles of Psychology* (1890). See also The Columbia Encyclopedia, accessed 12 Nov 2002 <<http://www.bartleby.com/65/st/streamco.html>>

monologue plays often seem to incorporate the invisible presence of one or more other people. This is something they have in common with the Dramatic monologue in poetry.

Similar to Pinter's *Monologue*, Arnold Wesker's *One Woman Plays* (*Four Portraits – of Mothers, Yardsdale*, for example) are often addressed to someone who is not present or visible, but clearly identified. Monologues such as *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon* are written in the style of a stream of consciousness. This gives the impression that the protagonist's thoughts are simply made audible, as she talks to herself, addressing a variety of absent people in doing so.

In Willy Russell's monologue play, *Shirley Valentine*, the protagonist Shirley Bradshaw tells her story not to absent characters, but to inanimate objects: first, this is a wall in her kitchen; later, it is a rock by the sea in Greece, the site of Shirley's escape and transformation back to Shirley Valentine, her maiden name. Despite the fact that she talks to objects, the character seems to be performing to an audience. At times, she seems to do this in order to enlarge her statements, which give her more courage to face the changes she is undertaking. The uncertainty over the fourth wall makes *Shirley Valentine* very similar to *Talking Heads* (see also Rose 1993:537).

Samuel Beckett's short monologue *Not I* (1972) differs from the plays above in that it is non-naturalistic. A mouth is the only part visible of the speaker, the person it belongs to remaining invisible throughout. The piece is a structured stream of consciousness: sections finish with the denial of self ('what?...who?...no!...she!', Beckett 1984). Although fragmented and abstract, the narrative describes a life with aggressive defensiveness. Whereas the Pinter and Wesker monologues are addressed to invisible people, in *Not I* there is another presence on stage, a silent and passive 'other': the Auditor. The sex of this person is indistinguishable, and it is covered in a black djellabah and hood. Its only function is to listen to the ruptured speech of Mouth and to occasionally lift its arm in a gesture of 'helpless empathy'.

Apart from *Shirley Valentine*, where the acknowledgement of an audience can be (but does not have to be) extra-diegetic, the monologues noted above stay within their diegetic world. The *Talking Heads* monologues share many of the same monologue conventions, but differ through the device of continuous direct address of the camera. Ambivalently, the plays transcend the diegesis of the character's world, but do not acknowledge the viewer's presence, nor do they act on it.

Talking Heads seems to be unique in not having a definite and defined addressee, and in offering ambivalent conclusions as to whether there is a fourth wall. The addressees of many monologue plays are silent but identifiable participators in the action. The undefined and uncertain presence of an observer in the *Talking Heads* monologues makes for a 'safer' choice to disclose deeply private, embarrassing or dangerous information to. Given that many of the *Talking Heads* characters fail to see that they are concealing a central truth from themselves, it is suggested that they use an imagined listener like a mirror, allowing them to check their story and their performance. As spectators behind this mirror, we are witnesses to the developing duality of each *Talking Heads* character, which is clearly detectable to us, but evidently not to them.

4.6.2) Structure and technique

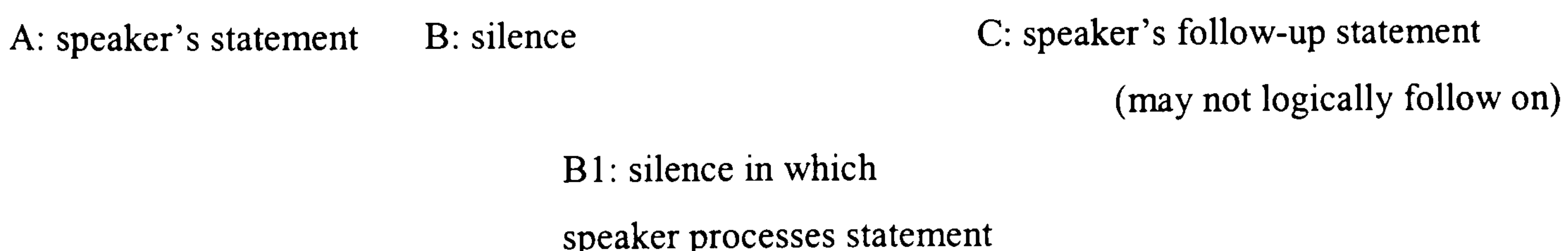
One thing at the time is my motto and keep children out of it. (*CTH*: 123)

At first glance, it is difficult to imagine a simpler form of television drama than the *Talking Heads* monologues: two cameras, a performer, and a few breaks with unintrusive music to indicate the passing of time. Several critics have addressed these structural and stylistic characteristics (see Hunt in Brandt 1993, Rose 1993 and 1995). The formula first created with *A Woman of No Importance* (Giles Foster, 1982) has remained almost unchanged through the two series of *Talking Heads*. Bennett has embraced simplicity as a principle: although events are told in the past tense, there are no flashbacks, although a lot of the action happens in between takes, this is only dealt with within the narrative; although there is a complex subtext to the text, this is not made visible, but left to the viewer's imagination.

Each monologue is divided into 4 or 5 sections of a few minutes each; a section often ending with a seemingly throwaway remark, which is a clue that will increase the viewer's knowledge of the plot. The short interludes are marked by a fade to black with intermediate music composed by George Fenton, one of Bennett's long-term collaborators. These breaks indicate the passing of time; anything from a few hours to a few years. They also help to give the viewer a sense of immediacy, as the protagonist tells of the recent past in each new section (see also Rose 1993:541). Peter Davison points out that the suggestion of the passing of time can also be seen as a technical convenience, as the audience will not feel that a break has simply been inserted for the performer's sake.³⁴ The monologues' stories themselves take place in between sections - what has happened is recalled by the speaker rather than narrated as it occurs. Important clues for the progression of the plot and the character are given through costume, props and (very sparse) settings. Proxemics can also deliver information – the way a character is positioned, comparing the beginning and the end of a monologue, for example. The progressing plot takes place 'offstage' and at a different time to that of its narration. The narrative's 'breakthrough' moments (i.e. while the story is being told) often happen during pauses, where the significance of what has been said previously is processed by character and listener.

There is a tension built up between the stage dialogue and the thoughts of each individual member of the audience and, implicitly between each member of the audience. It is this implicit tension which gives the play its strange theatrical power. (Davison 1982:64)

This quotation is made with reference to Harold Pinter's 'early sketch' *Last to Go*, but it can be applied to Bennett's technique in *Talking Heads*. The following diagram, suggested by the critic Peter Davison (2002), clarifies the potential function of a silence.



There are two outcomes for this sequence. In the first case, the pause (B1) follows up the statement just made and processes it, C then moving on from this different level of information. The following example from *A Cream Cracker Under the Settee* sees the protagonist trying to draw attention to herself, as she has fallen and broken her hip, but she is then overpowered by her obsession with cleanliness:

Doris: Young lad.

She begins to wave

The cheeky monkey. He's spending a penny. Hey.

She shouts. Hey. Get out. Go on. Clear off. You little demon. Would you credit it? Inside our gate. Broad daylight. The place'll stink.

A pause in which she realises what she has done.

He wouldn't have known what to do anyway. (CTH:102; my bold setting)

In the second case, the silence will be used to make the decision to say something, even though it might not be connected to the first statement. *The Outside Dog (Talking Heads II)* offers an example, when Marjory decides to say what she already knows: that her husband is the murderer the police have been searching for:

I wish I'd something to do. I've cleaned down twice already. The yard wants doing only I can't do it with folks and reporters hanging about.

Pause.

He's lying, of course. Our Tina hasn't been seen to, so when he takes her out he never lets her off. Ever. (CTH:179)

Pauses can also come *after* a realisation, normally quite shocking, and mean the character needs this short moment to find an explanation to protect him/herself from this dangerous truth. Rosemary, in *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*, learns that her husband has taken part in the ritualistic sexual abuse of her neighbour:

One of them had a funny habit...and I knew what she was going to say the second before she said it....a funny habit of whistling under his breath.

Pause

Of course, a lot of people do that.

Fade

(CTH:190)

³⁴ Informal conversation with PhD supervisor Prof. Peter Davison, Oct. 4, 2002.

The dramatic rhythm of narrative and pause is used to emphasise themes from episode to episode. Pauses often come directly before the end of a section, and can lead to a confession, as in this example from *Miss Fozzard Finds Her Feet (Talking Heads II)*

I was just recounting my conversation with Mr Suddaby and how they're decamping to Scarborough when Bernard suddenly throws back his head and yawns.

I rang Mr Clarkson-Hall this morning. He says that's progress.

Pause

I do miss work *Fade* (CTH:147)

The simplicity with which Bennett sets up the form of *Talking Heads* is evident also in the way Bennett tells and structures the stories of his protagonists. Yet the discussion has suggested a variety of monologic conventions as possible influences on this apparently simple form. In an attempt to analyse the generically and formally complex nature of *Talking Heads*, the following gathers arguments for expansion of the influences on the monologues from a variety of media.

4.6.3) The influence of other forms and media

Although *Talking Heads* were written for television, their simplicity has been interpreted as pointing both towards stage conventions of the monologue and the short story (for example, by Albert Hunt in Brandt 1993:21). The *Talking Heads* characters are recognisably 'Bennettian': The pieces are about ordinary people in their everyday environment, telling their story. *How* this story is told marks a significant formal departure from Bennett's previous television plays, and constitutes a complex case of 'generic crossing', an example of "novelists and dramatists sallying into each others' territories" (Dorrit Cohn in Rose 1995:17) Television drama often has a hybrid nature and displays a host of influences (see also Creeber 2001:4). It is on these influences that I wish to begin discussion of the generic nature of *Talking Heads*.

Here television shows its affinity not only with the stage – the monologue is after all a well-established minor theatrical form – but with the short story as well. This is TV drama at its most literary. (Brandt 1993:6)

Brandt demonstrates how theatre, television and short story are all part of what makes the form of *Talking Heads* “as full as a novel, ripe as an apple, a miniature masterpiece” (Reynolds 1998:21). The monologues thus combine many generic elements to create a new form, which is demonstrated by comparing structural and technical principles of *Talking Heads* to those of forms which have lent themselves as a generic influence.

Although formally unusual for television, Bennett wrote the monologues specifically for the medium: the viewer sees the protagonist’s face in close up or medium close up virtually the whole time. *Talking Heads* is fairly conservative in its approach to the technical possibilities of the television medium. Bennett states that, for reasons of technical simplicity, he conceived these individual sections as uninterrupted shots, with two cameras. Although the shot size changes, the angle generally does not. To achieve an uninterrupted build-up within each of the sections, director and performer had to fall back on takes of almost a theatrical length. The concentration on the sole performer and his/ her closeness to the camera make it virtually impossible to interrupt a take, as cuts would be too noticeable. Some sections are over ten minutes long, and all the actors agreed that they could not work with an autocue (*CTH*:10). This makes the shooting of any one section similar to giving a performance, as uninterrupted build-up and the memorising of a large amount of text become necessary. Albert Hunt (in Brandt 1993:21) calls this filmed live performance a “reassertion of theatricality”, claiming that “demands made on the performers” bring back “a theatrical quality of immediacy, which created its own tension on screen”. It is also part of theatrical tradition to put the actor at the centre of a play, and to create a performance environment where nothing distracts from the achievement of this actor.

His endings are not merely a surprise or contrary to expectation, they appear in a sort of lateral way, as if popping out from around the corner; and it is only then

that the reader realizes that certain details here and there had hinted at the possibility of such an ending.³⁵

The above describes the short stories of O. Henry, but it could easily be applied to a *Talking Heads* monologue. As with many short stories, *Talking Heads* are structured in a way that brings gradual revelation through ‘clues’. Sometimes, the endings are also quite surprising: in *Playing Sandwiches*, for example, the last section is set in prison. Between the penultimate and the last episode, the protagonist has been arrested, has stood trial and has been imprisoned. All these events are then narrated, but the surprise is in the ‘jump’, and in the eventfulness of the gap between episodes.

Creating a social and physical world by reporting in the past tense what has been done, seen and said is a strategy primarily of narrative fiction. (Turner 1997:59)

The sparseness of the performance environment and the heavy reliance on words to evoke situations also point to links with the form of short story.

Some authors have described the short story as having its origins in a single image, a snapshot that developed into a story:

The special appeal of the snapshot is its seeming casualness, its subject caught perhaps in a moment of total unselfconsciousness, creating the illusion that the photographer [...] is included in the artlessness he captures. (Shaw 1983:14/5)

Talking Heads characters are often the evolution of ‘snapshots’ Bennett has observed. Artlessness is also a feature of the *Talking Heads* concept, stressing the ‘realness’ of the character and the language used. Putting aside issues of the real quality of the *Talking Heads* style, its language is instantly recognisable as belonging to people who maybe are not, but could be (or have been) real. Bennett planned to direct his first monologue in the style of *Talking Heads*, *A Woman of No Importance*. In the following, he attributes the format’s simplicity partly to his inexperience as a director:

³⁵ Excerpt from B.M Eixenbaum, The Literary Structure of an O. Henry Short Story; *The O. Henry Page*), accessed April 4, 2002, <<http://ppl.nhmccd.edu/~dcox/ohenry/crit9.html>>

Thinking I would be able to manage at the most two cameras, I planned the play as a series of midshots with the camera tracking in very slowly to a close-up, holding the close-up for a while, then just as slowly, coming out again. I didn't figure on there being any cuts within scenes, though this would place a heavy burden on the performer, some sections being pretty lengthy: the first speech, for instance lasts twelve minutes. To shoot in such a way makes cutting virtually impossible: one fluff, and it's back to the top of the scene again (Introduction *CTH*:10)

Bennett's simple conception of *Talking Heads* put considerable demands on the performer. Theatrical quality arises from sequences being shot in long, uninterrupted takes. The acting style required, however, is more televisual than theatrical. *Talking Heads* offers the viewer a closeness to the protagonist which cannot be achieved by an adaptation of the monologue on stage. As will be discussed in more detail, the monologues are built on the dramaturgical principle of two distinctive levels of narrative, representing two versions of the same material: linguistic and visual, where the face does all the telling on television. The weighting of the two narrative levels, verbal and non-verbal, is almost equal on screen, whereas this balance greatly shifts in favour of the verbal on stage, as the performer's face is normally too far away from the audience to produce the minimalist non-verbal story that is so clearly communicated on the screen. The tale has to be supported by 'larger' gestures and hints in the way the performer structures the text on stage. It can be argued that silences still remain an integral part of the expressive total of the monologues, but even these have a different function on stage to that on the screen. In the television plays, silences are invitations to scrutinise the face, the gestures and the posture of the protagonist. On stage, silences emphasise the words spoken previously, giving the audience time for their meaning to 'sink in' (see also above for the function of silences in *Talking Heads*)

Instead of illustrating the action, what we see adds a dimension, creating a tension between the word and the image [...] narrative in the past being reported by a performer we see in the present (Hunt in Brandt 1993:37)

The two levels – the story as it is told and the story as it is put together by the recipient – are determined mainly by *verbal* narrative and the clues that are in the story. This two-tiered approach gives away much more about a character than the text on its own could. The tale is told in a selective way, its protagonist deliberately or subconsciously

withholding information from the recipient. This non-verbal information is in the subtext, enabling Bennett to write a character as withholding information, while still presenting 'the whole picture'.

Delia Dick (1996:22) remarks on how the long camera takes draw us into the narrator's world. "Our concentration is steadily invited, rather than fought for by multi-angled images."

Apart from being produced for television and for the stage, both series of *Talking Heads* have been extremely successful as 'talking books'. Both volumes were best selling audio books when they came out, and continue to add to Bennett's success in this medium. The reason why the monologues transferred to another medium so effortlessly, it might be argued, is that the monologues have certain features of the radio play: storytelling, the tradition of the narrator, the single speaker in personal narrative. Also, the economy of production is not restricted to *Talking Heads*' visual style: there are no sound effects, and music is used only over the titles, and between sections, to indicate the passing of time. Losing the visual part of the narrative simply lends greater weight to the spoken word: the listener concentrates on the meanings of silence and the nuances in the voice which carry the text and its subtext. This is also a convention of the comic monologue, where the performer either talks to an invisible third party, or pretends to be part of a group of people while suggesting all the characters the audience cannot see. In radio drama, the voice and accompanying sounds are all the listener has got to build a character. This means that the visualisation provided in the television version of *Talking Heads* is taken on by the audience themselves, who will imagine a character according to the associations the actor's voice provides.

In 1986, Bennett discovered a book of photographs, *Interior America*, by Chauncy Hare, which became an influence for *Talking Heads I*.

As the title suggests the photographs are of people in their rooms and in my series of TV monologues, *Talking Heads*, I tried to capture some of the bleak atmosphere

of Hare's photographs and to animate the kind of characters who in England might have been his sitters. (Bennett in Segal 1993:1)

He also compares the approach of *Talking Heads* to the work of the English photographer Magda Segal, who has taken widely known photographs of Alan Bennett. The key lies in the decision not to catch the sitters (Segal or Hare) or the deliverers of the monologues (Bennett) unawares; all of them present themselves for the camera. Bennett comments: "[...] they want to be seen as they see themselves [...]. And without condescending to her subjects Magda Segal shows that the way they present themselves is part of their personality and their appeal. Letting us see them as they see themselves she confers dignity on them." Segal and Bennett also both realise that, in leaving the way of presentation to the characters, they reveal more about themselves than author or photographer could have done.

People in rooms
Sitters in settings
Subjects with objects

These are the threshold of drama

Something is about to happen (Bennett in Segal 1993:1)

4.6.4) The comic monologue

But how do you explain what a monologue is to someone who does want to know and has no Greek. I would say: 'I'm not talking to myself, I'm pretending there is someone else on stage with me and I talk to him. If I pretend clearly enough I should be able to make you, the audience, accept the invisible character I'm imagining. (Grenfell 1980:251)

In *Contemporary Drama and the Popular Dramatic Tradition in England*, Peter Davison (1982) demonstrates the significant influence of Music Hall conventions on contemporary drama. One of the most popular forms of Music Hall entertainment was the comic monologue. It is evident that the format of *Talking Heads* has some of its roots in the conventions of the comic monologue: the setting is simple (not *just* due to economic limitations), the performer relies on powers of characterisation, mime and mimicry to

signify environment, circumstance and to recall or re-enact conversations, comic effect will often arise from the audience's familiarity with characters similar to those on stage/ screen.

Famous performers of this century include Stanley Holloway (1890-1982), Mabel Constanduros (d. 1957), Ruth Draper (1884 - 1956) and Joyce Grenfell (1910-79). In particular Draper's way of sourcing material for her monologues shows similarities with Bennett's method: both use people they have known to create realistic characters. In this process, linguistic, facial and gestural observation make the character 'come alive':

"Ruth, too, like Ellen Terry, seized the things which clever people often miss which chill and warm the heart" (Origo in Rose 1995:54)

Some of Joyce Grenfell's characters seem to be direct ancestors of Bennett's *Talking Heads* protagonists. Grenfell's monologues, deliberately artless in form and language, are based on a similar dramaturgy to that of *Talking Heads*: quite early on, the audience will understand more than the protagonists, who are telling "a story to the meaning of which they are not entirely privy".

Norman Evans' Yorkshire housewife in "Over the Garden Wall" (less a 'drag act', than performed in the tradition of the Pantomime Dame or the Ugly Sisters) can also be counted among *Talking Heads* -predecessors. There are similarities in language, dialect, register and linguistic and physical mannerism, and both Bennett's and Evans' monologues are based on an amalgamation of northern 'types' the creators have observed. Bennett has stated that many of his female characters are modelled on aunts and on his mother. Joyce Grenfell explains her creation of a character in a similar way:

The character speaks in the same shape of phrase and with an unexpected use of words, as did one of my dearest older friends, Hester Alington, wife of the Dean of Durham [...], attractively eccentric and individual. Mrs A [...] had a deep, dark, rumbling voice that I could not reproduce for long without dislocating something; and I did not want to copy Mrs A except in her unique way with a sentence. This was never straightforward. [...]

The 'Eng. Lit.' character was taller, thinner and more deliberate [than Mrs Alington, its real-life inspiration], with a clear-cut precision, matched by Mrs A's mind and

intelligence. I gave her a housekeeper called Mrs Kinton and invented Mrs A.-like lines for her to say. 'Mrs Kinton – is there a tolerable chance of your being in close proximity to a kettle?' I added to Mrs A.'s kind of phrase-building an inability to pronounce the letter r. (Grenfell 1980:261)

This 'real' quality, or familiarity, both linguistic and otherwise, ensures an involvement on the part of the audience. Indeed, a frequent response to Bennett's monologues is that viewers state they know somebody very similar to a protagonist. Within the field of comic monologue, the character will always have a heightened quality to it, but laughter is still sparked by recognition, not detachment. This provides a feeling of inclusiveness, a reassuring familiarity, important in times of crisis or deprivation.

Talking Heads can be compared to the comic monologue in that the two share certain aspects in the creation of a comic effect.

The characters often incongruously juxtapose ideas:

I wasn't at home in that sort of hotel I can tell you. I said to the man I'd been put next to, who I took to be my husband, I said, 'Curtains in orange nylon and no place mats, there's not even the veneer of civilisation.' He said, 'Don't talk to me about orange nylon. I was on a jury once that sentenced Richard Attenborough to death.' (Lesley in *Her Big Chance*, CTH:82)

The notions of 'funny' and 'sad' are often sharply juxtaposed:

Just then there's a little toot on the horn and she runs to the lav again. I said, 'Don't go. Don't leave me, Mam' She said, 'I'm not giving in to you, you're a grown man. Is my underskirt showing?' He toots again. She says, 'Look at your magazines, make yourself a poached egg.' I said, 'Mam.' She said, 'There's a bit of chicken in the fridge. You could iron those two vests. Take a tablet. Give us a kiss. Toodle pip.' (*A Chip in the Sugar*, CTH:51)

Although aware of the inherent sadness of this scene, we laugh at the juxtaposition of important and trivial statements – Graham is expressing existential fear of abandonment, and his mother, although she is aware of this, is deflecting her acknowledgement by a stream of unimportant banter.

[...] It is this technique that Pinter develops even further, first allowing us to laugh, and then surprising us by making us realise what we are laughing at. (Davison 1982:56)

This occasionally gives the monologues a dimension of tragedy, even if they are never concerned with heroic, but with flawed and self-deceiving characters.

Talking Heads and comic monologues also have in common that there is often a focus on the unmasking of a character's pretence, in the case below, an upper-class character's unease about talking casually to the servant is shown:

Oh, Mrs Finley, is there a favourable chance of your finding yourself in close proximity to a kettle? I think Mr Wimble and I are both very well disposed towards the idea of some tea. And something crunchy? Lovely. (*Stately as a Galleon*, quoted in Rose 1995:71)

Refined-looking feller, seventy-odd but with a lovely head of hair, one of the double-fronted houses that look over the cricket field. Rests my foot on a large silk handkerchief which I thought was a civilised touch; Mr Suddaby just used to use yesterday's *Evening Post*. (*Miss Fozzard Finds Her Feet*, CTH:148)

Obviously, there are also differences between the monologues performed in music halls and *Talking Heads*; some of them determined by the medium of television. *Talking Heads* is more economical with other characters. In comic monologues, there will often be an imaginary second person, or even more, such as in Grenfell's legendary Nursery School series of sketches. Although she performs these pieces entirely on her own, through her interaction and her addressing of other characters, the viewer is invited to believe there are other characters there with her.³⁶ In *Talking Heads*, there is no interaction with invisible characters at the time of the story being told, although there are re-enactments in retrospect for the purpose of demonstration, sometimes in reported speech, sometimes in a direct quotation of what was said by another character. The monologues do not go as far as classic comic monologues in the performer imitating other characters; they suggest the other person, and remain firmly themselves.

Some music-hall comedians made a feature of establishing direct contact with their audiences at once and ‘in their own (public) person’. They would then present an act in which reference would be made to mythical mothers, brothers, girl friends and, inevitably, mothers-in-law. (Davison 1982:30)

Talking Heads differs from monologues by authors contemporary to Bennett in the way in which the characters directly address the camera (or the audience, in the stage version). It is suggested here that this is a stylistic device Bennett has transferred to his work from conventions associated with the comic monologue. He does not, however, use it in the same fashion as the comedians described in the above quotation. The *Talking Heads* protagonists never ‘leave’ their character, and they do not talk to the viewers, they merely address them. Whether they do this for greater empathy, whether it is left open whom the characters are actually talking to, and in some cases performing for, whether the audience takes the part of the passive ‘mirror’ is in the final analysis the decision of the director and the actor working on the monologues. As Albert Hunt (in Brandt 1993:22) points out:

The *Talking Heads* form would insist (to paraphrase Arthur Miller) that ‘attention must be paid’.

Having examined the above range of formal influences,³⁷ it is evident that, although first conceived for television, *Talking Heads* can be described as drawing on conventions of stage monologue, television play, short story or radio play. This ‘pick and mix’ approach, the fact that the monologues straddle conventions of different media makes them suitable for transfer to these very media.

In conclusion, this section has shown that most of Bennett’s works, especially in the last 20 years of his career, are generic hybrids, and are infiltrated by autobiographical material.

³⁶ Building up a complete and complex mental picture [...] One of the possibilities of an act that depends upon mental images is that it can go beyond the limitations of actuality. The late Joyce Grenfell’s brilliant monologues could conjure up real, almost palpable nursery schools. (Davison 1982:42)

³⁷ The monologues are also discussed under narratological aspects in Chapter 8.

Whilst we have names for countless genres in many media, some theorists have argued that there are also many genres (and sub-genres) for which we have no names. (Chandler 2000:1)

The ease with which Bennett's work is adapted to other media suggests a non-specific approach to both form and medium by the author. It also reveals Bennett's craftsmanship in realising what medium-specific conventions an adapted work needs to make the transition. We can therefore diagnose a certain generic anarchy, also caused by Bennett's increasing auteurist identity and the artistic control that comes with it. It can be said that Bennett has reached a status as an auteur (but also as a performer, presenter and critic) where he can disregard generic boundaries.

There are no distractions. Every word counts. Every moment matters. "Sui generis," as Shivas [producer and director] says of Bennett, "sui generis".³⁸

³⁸ Gillian Reynold "Alan Bennett's extraordinary people", *The Daily Telegraph*, Tuesday, Oct. 6, 1998.

5) Writers and Disguises

Biography begets autobiography. (Garber in Rhiel & Suchoff 1996:177)

Daphne Turner, in the acknowledgements to her 1997 monograph on Bennett (vii), thanks him for letting the book go ahead, especially “as the better I got to know his work, the more I realized how much he disliked writing about writers”. Despite his apparent unease, Bennett has written three plays, a film script and numerous essays and reviews about the lives of writers. He has frequently commented on the way in which other authors influence his presentation of himself as a writer. Bennett’s writing constructs a discourse on the influence of other writers on himself (both as author and as persona), with Kafka, Proust and Larkin as the most prominent figures. As he has acknowledged, in researching other writers, Bennett does not just read the source texts, but uses secondary literature such as biography and critical monographs to inform his own writing, as revealed by diary entries and reviews, regularly appearing in the *London Review of Books*. The works that fall into this category include three plays about writers, *Kafka’s Dick*, *The Insurance Man* (also on Kafka), and *102 Boulevard Haussman* (on Proust). Bennett has also adapted John Lahr’s biography of Joe Orton, *Prick Up Your Ears* for the screen. He has also written about other historical characters: two one-act plays about the two Cambridge Spies, Guy Burgess and Anthony Blunt (*An Englishman Abroad* and *A Question of Attribution*), as well as the play *The Madness of George III (George III)*, later adapted for the screen. His documentary series on twentieth century British poets, *Poetry in Motion* combined biographical and literary material. It is perhaps significant that one of the most reclusive of these poets, Philip Larkin, has been a recurrent theme in Bennett’s non-dramatic writing.

Bennett writes about other writers through integrating them into his work, but also by commenting on their work and related criticism and biography from the perspective of the critic, a profession for which he has frequently expressed dislike. Responding to Steven Berkoff’s statement that theatre critics are “like worn-out old tarts”, Bennett remarks:

If only they were, the theatre would be in a better state. In fact critics are much more like dizzy girls out for the evening, just longing to be fucked and happy to be taken in by any plausible rogue [...] A cheap thrill is all they want. Worn-out old tarts have at least got past that stage. (*WH*:257)

This is aimed at theatre critics, but Bennett has shown equal dislike for literary criticism:

[...] famished for subjects, some critics don't wait for death before hacking a chunk off their chosen prey and retiring to the academic undergrowth to chew it over [...] (*Poetry*:2)

His comment implies that critical interpretation of an author's life and works should not be undertaken until the artist is dead. His critics and academics are savage animals, tearing flesh off an artist who is still alive. Interestingly, these principles do not lead to Bennett's own abstinence as a critic, as he has discussed both the lives and works of other writers (Philip Larkin and John Osborne, for example) while they were still alive, and has been a book reviewer of living authors in the *London Review of Books*. Despite this, Bennett's following remarks about the programme notes for a play he attended show his general dislike of the trend to introduce, contextualise and interpret a work:

[...] there is a lengthy essay on the issues purportedly touched on in the production. If it's a revival of an unpretentious domestic comedy from the thirties there is likely to be a photomontage of the dole queues to emphasize The Other Side of the Picture, and any play that uses words (and some of them still do) is as like as not accompanied by a thumbnail sketch of the life and loves of Wittgenstein, just to put the critics in the proper frame of mind. (*WH*:607)

I would suggest that Bennett's dislike of programme notes and interpretations does not necessarily imply the view that a text should be left uncommented. Programme booklets of productions of Bennett's own plays demonstrate that he himself often provides essays or introductions on the evolution and context of his works, just as his prefaces to his published play texts have become longer and more detailed throughout his career (see Chapter 6). Bennett seems to resent his lack of control over the interpretations of his texts, and expresses anxiety over the ownership of his works, and over the way in which his life is presented. Bennett states in *Telling Tales* (9, see also Chapter 6) that he wants to tell his own stories, and tell them unmediated. Critics' readings of other writers' works may

remind Bennett that there are many possible readings of his own texts. As discussed in all sections of this chapter, Bennett has shown an increasing tendency to control not only his works, but also possible readings of his works. It is as if he wants to be the only authorised commentator on his own texts, although he produces work about other artists, particularly writers. Is writing about writers a privilege Bennett reserves for himself? Or, in another possible reading of Turner's acknowledgement, does he write about other writers in order to express his dislike for the practice?

In 2001, Alexander Games produced an unofficial biography of Bennett. It serves here to demonstrate Bennett's rejection of others writing about him, and also provides an example of conventional forms of life writing.

...he [Bennett] was, from the word go, a performer who – on stage and off – played versions of himself. [...] And any biography worth its salt has to grapple with that amorphous duality. (Preston 2001:15.)

When *Backing into the Limelight* was published, critics commented on the fact that the biography did not provide any new revelations on Bennett's life beyond those already in circulation. It was 'the real Bennett' everyone was interested in, and consequently, the conclusion was drawn that a more ruthless investigator should have been given the commission to write the book. The lack of groundbreaking new facts is partly due to Bennett's refusal to co-operate with Games, a refusal that seemed to include most of his friends and colleagues. There is no lack of material available on Bennett, and, for want of the author's participation, Games declares his work that of a chronicler and of an eavesdropper (Games 2001:4). He freely admits he cannot present a straightforward answer to the central question of what Bennett "is really like", but can only show patterns and investigate parallels between life and art. After a chance encounter with Bennett in the street in Camden Town, which saw the playwright running away, Games decided that one of his aims was to conduct "an investigation into why Alan Bennett is running away" (Games 2001:6) from journalists, admirers, biographers and academics.¹

¹ Bennett declared in the *Guardian* (25 May 1992; see Games 2001:245) that "not to be interviewed is the only answer", although several profiles appeared after 1992.

From the early 1990s onwards, Games reads Bennett personal life through his works, doing in effect what many readers do: reading the work to know more about the life, the ‘next best thing’ after straightforward biographical revelation. Bennett’s early years have so far only been documented by himself, mainly in *Writing Home* and *Telling Tales*. Games’ thorough archival research suggests that there is a pattern that takes shape earlier than assumed, and that Bennett had a public self before he became a well-known public figure. If one is convinced by Games’ reading of archival material, Bennett has retrospectively created the wistful, inarticulate persona, when in reality he was a performer at an early stage.² Games points out that the accumulated picture points to “an opinionated, articulate, self-possessed, and nowhere near as hunched or crab-like as he has made himself out to be. [...] What matters is that Bennett made many friends at Leeds Modern, besides covering himself in academic glory.” (Games 2001:24). When describing these contradictions between the supposed Bennett person and the constructed persona, Games is doing what is expected of him as a biographer: uncovering, comparing and searching for early determining factors for later patterns. He cannot maintain this role throughout the biography, however, because Bennett has prevented this by making all these possible connections himself. *Backing into the Limelight* represents Bennett’s ambiguities as a writer and as a persona. A successful biography, however, is expected to produce revelations. Consequently, Games has chosen a way appropriate to Bennett, but by that very device is considered unsuccessful as a biographer.

5.1) Spies and Writers

Bennett has always produced work on the lives of other writers, and can therefore be seen in the role of a biographer, albeit an unconventional one. Just as ‘autobiography’ has to be defined very loosely in the terms of this study, Bennett’s works that can be associated with biography do not follow established ways of life writing. It is a truism that biography reveals at least as much about its writer as it does about its subject, but Bennett relates all

² For example, Games points out that Bennett won the Declamation Prize and the Leeds Institute Sixth Form Prize in 1950/51, became honorary secretary of the Literary and Historical Society and was made senior prefect. This contradicts the shy, ill at ease and inarticulate presence Bennett ‘sells’ as his earlier persona.

other writers' lives back to his own, making it clear in the process that his intention is not to be 'faithful' or 'authentic', but that lives are employed according to the function he has assigned them. Bennett may examine a writer's life as a potential benchmark for a 'typical' writer's life, as a vehicle for the development of an idea, or may compare it with his own identity as a writer. Furthermore, Bennett develops the theme of the writer as an observing outsider, showing the inevitability of authorial sacrifice (e.g. of health, of a 'normal' life) through the example of writers like Kafka, Proust and Larkin. O'Mealy (2001:55) groups Bennett's plays on other writers with Bennett's spy-plays, arguing that the plays show "interesting parallels between the motives and methods of spies and writers."

Alan's fascinated by the idea of spying: the idea of being outside a society and at the same time within it. There's the sense that as a writer he's a spy on his own world: it's certainly one of the characteristics throughout his work. (Eyre quoted in O'Mealy 2001:56)

Bennett's concept of an author as a spy is one of many recurrent ideas in his writings. The relationship between authorship and exploitation has been another pervasive strand of investigation, linked to the concept of spying in that it also pictures the author as an outsider, observing rather than participating, and using other people's lives as a means for self-expression. Ideas of authorship and Bennett's autobiographical writing are inextricable linked. O'Mealy aligns the plays about spies and writers:

Spies and writers are secret sharers in a literal sense; they observe where often they shouldn't, and they pass along what they have seen, often to the distress of those they have observed. They work best in solitude and isolation. In Bennett's world, their loyalties are often only to themselves, rather than to any ideology. The writer expresses himself for the sake of self-expression; the spy transgresses for the sake of transgression. (O'Mealy 2001:56)

Ever since the rise of Romantic biography and autobiography in the eighteenth century, works have often been read in connection with the lives of their authors, and biographical knowledge has been seen as a key to interpretation. The author therefore gains a strong

presence within a text from the late eighteenth century onwards.³ Foucault associates this sense of the property of textual products with the rise of capitalist individualism which characterises the period (quoted in Hawthorn 2000:24). Once an individual is named as producing and ‘owning’ a text, the natural process of looking for the presence of this producer in the text is set in motion.⁴ William Christie (2001) explains that the discovery of the self as dominant material was prompted by writers’ search for new territory. Classical writers had dealt with “epic quest and epic endurance within the mythological memory of their respective cultures”. Classical inheritance was assimilated to Biblical history (Christie 2001:8). Therefore, the innovative poet of a revolutionary age was left to contend with another form of heroism: man’s own spiritual development, his mental quest and growing notions of ‘the self’. Putting themselves at the centre of their writing, authors of the age of Romanticism apply these new notions to their own selves, aiming for “the growth of the mind” (Anderson 2001:54) and “a search for origins” (ibid:53). In keeping with former traditions, and the influence of classic literature, this was still presented as an epic undertaking, a great journey that covered stages in the hero’s intellectual and spiritual development. But while previously this had been somebody else’s journey or quest, the protagonist of that journey was now the author.

A traveller I am,
And all my tale is of myself.
(Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, III, 196 – 7)

The centring of the self in Romantic poetry leads to a personalisation of writing, because the ‘I’ within the text is presented as real. The reception of a text is therefore heavily formed by the reader’s assumption that the ‘I’ in the text is identical with the ‘I’ of its author. The romantic authors’ (and their readership’s) creation of a persona within the texts

³ The term autobiography is relatively young, even though we have known descriptions of the self since ancient times. The Great Oxford Dictionary dates it to 1809; it emerges for the first time in a German speaking country in 1796, in the collection inspired by Herder called „Self-biographies of famous men“. While early memoirs such as religious life stories were designed to serve a higher purpose, classical autobiography only emerges with the concept of human individuality in the course of the period of Enlightenment. Bodo Mrozek “Die Tyrranei der Intimität”, *Der Tagesspiegel*, accessed Aug. 26, 2003, <<http://archiv.tagesspiegel.de/archiv/26.08.2003/713566.asp>> (my translation from German).

⁴ Booth, in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, calls this process the creation of ‘the implied author’ (quoted in Hawthorn 2000:25). This term is examined in Chapter 8).

built on the impulse of the implied author, and in some cases exploited this autobiographical connection successfully. The perception of the author as the individual behind the text naturally prompts the beginning of the rise of autobiography.

In the twentieth century, biography and autobiography have developed into hugely popular literary genres. Readers will therefore often have biographical knowledge of an author before reading his/ her works, and will often read work with the objective of comparing life with art, and finding parallels. The beliefs on the author's presence in the text, relatively stable since the Romantic age, were questioned in the 1960s by post-structuralist critics. The separation of the text from the author after production was announced, meaning that the author's intentions were declared no more significant than a reader's interpretation, and that the text acquired autonomy after being made public. Post-structuralist ideas surrounding the independence of the text heighten the awareness of the instability of a text's meaning, and therefore, the instability and potential artificiality of the authorial persona *within* that text. In retrospect, however, despite declaring the independence of the text from its author, post-structuralism has not managed to significantly damage the importance of the life within the work within popular and academic perception. Works such as Sean Burke's *The Death and Return of the Author* (1992) document this by pointing out that autobiography and biography have become the subject of critical theory. The author is therefore restored as a central focus of interest to the text in a climate of growing critical interest in the construction of self. The confusion between persona and person is not merely a post-modern phenomenon. Tomasevskij sums up the construction of an authorial persona:

The literary work plays on the potential reality of the author's subjective outpourings and confessions. Thus the biography that is useful to the literary historian is not the author's curriculum vitae or the investigator's account of his life. What the literary historian really needs is the biographical legend created by the author himself. Only such a legend is a *literary fact*.
(Tomasevskij in Burke 1995:89)

This demonstrates how a text is influenced through a reader with biographical knowledge of an author. In summary, the emergence of the author-persona in the Romantic age lays the foundation for making connections between a work and its author.

Bennett's works and their reception seem to show him as an author who undermines the power of post-structuralism, as the writer and his meaning are inscribed indelibly on the text. The audience's reception of Bennett's works is very heavily influenced by his public persona. Bennett, however, sees the connection between life and art as ambivalent:

That fictional characters are not drawn directly from life is a truism. Evelyn Waugh's epigraph to *Brideshead Revisited* puts it succinctly: 'I am not I; thou are not he or she; they are not they.' But such a straightforward disavowal is misleading, because characters are taken from life: it's just that they are seldom yanked out of it quite so unceremoniously as the public imagines. (*CTH*:121)

Bennett discourages the idea that art can be seen as a reflection on the life of its creator by promoting the separation of biography and literary product. It is in Bennett's self-interest to make this point, as he has shunned ideas that his life exactly mirrors that of, for example, the nondescript protagonists that populate some of his stage and television plays, and to whom he has linked some of his own characteristics. Life will always provide the material for art, but that art will then probably depart from 'what really happened'. Bennett questions whether it helps the reader's understanding to know the exact nature of the connection between life and art. Authors "dislike being asked what their work means" (*Poetry*:3), but can also be uncomfortable with readers making their own conclusions. The reader's pleasure of finding a possible connection, and thus 'personalising' a literary work has to be taken into account:

And some knowledge of a poet's life must add to the pleasure and understanding of his or her poetry. What the poet is afraid of is that the life will somehow invalidate the art (cries of 'He's insincere!' 'She's inconsistent!'). But you can enjoy literary biography while at the same time recognising that the literary works, once written, have an independent existence, regardless of the circumstances in which they were produced. (*Poetry*:4)

Bennett contributes to the debate about the relationship between a writer's life and work,⁵ assuming a position of compromise. He tolerates biographical curiosity, but discourages its dominance, resenting the fact that works are read to find out more about an author's life,

⁵ See also Tomasevskij in Burke 1995:84.

rather than the other way round. Nevertheless, Bennett himself often constructs his biographical works from what is known about a writer's life. He often seems to concentrate on conceived ideas and stereotypes of a writer, as in the case of Kafka and Proust, and then furnishes the resulting 'life' with a framework of intricate references to the writer's work. *Kafka's Dick*, for example, makes direct references to *Metamorphosis* to *The Trial*.¹⁰² *Boulevard Haussmann*, the television play about Marcel Proust's home life, shows life inside the famous cork lined room. It indulges stereotypes of the artists' isolation and sacrifices for art's sake, as well as illustrating their relentlessness in pursuit of material and inspiration.

One detects contradictions in some of Bennett's points. On the one hand, he wants to protect the life from straightforward assumptions of integration into works, as this would mean divorcing the text from its author. On the other hand, he expresses considerable anxiety at the prospect of his texts being read in a way he does not intend them to be read. This implies the wish to own not only the text, but also its meanings and interpretations.

5.2) 'Literature' and Anxiety

Literary appreciation based on biographical appreciation can lead to what Bennett calls "fan clubs". He has frequently expressed his dislike of people who are 'fans' of a writer or a book. When Bennett was beginning work on the adaptation of *The Wind in the Willows*, it was the fact that the book had 'fans' that almost made him go back on his decision.⁶ It seems that 'fans' stand for everything Bennett hates in the way literature is incorporated into popular culture – whether it is the menu at a Bloomsbury hotel in London ('Virginia's Favourite' one of the desserts), or whether it is the hobby biographers and collectors of trivia, as described in Bennett's parody "Say Cheese, Virginia":

⁶ One consideration that had kept me away from the book [*The Wind in the Willows*] for so long, gave it a protective coating every bit as off-putting as those black and maroon bindings of my childhood, was that it had *fans*. It's often a children's book – *Winnie the Pooh*, *Alice* and *The Hobbit* are examples – or it is a grown-up children's book such as those of Wodehouse, E.F. Benson and Conan Doyle. But Jane Austen and Anthony Trollope are nothing if not adult and they have fans too – '[...] (*Willows*:x)

Dilys and I have been dedicated fans of Bloomsbury ever since Dilys's dandruff and my appliance finally put paid to the ballroom dancing. [...]

Billingham, Prestatyn, Loughborough – scarcely a town of any size that does not boast one, sometimes two, Woolf Clubs. This last Tuesday, for instance, saw us both at Garstang, a fork supper prior to Kevin Glusburn's thought-provoking paper 'Lytton Strachey: An Hitherto Unrecorded Incident in the Slipper Baths at Poulton-le-Fylde'. Need I add that Carrington fans were out in force? (*WH*:594)

Just as Bennett differentiates between readers and fans, he makes a distinction between literature and 'Literature'. The upper case encapsulates the awe he feels in the face of literature that is considered 'great', but also the sense of sarcastic defiance, because this awe makes him feel guilty and deficient for not being able to enjoy 'Literature'.

When I was young, I used to feel that literature was a club of which I would never be a proper member as a reader, let alone a writer. It wasn't that I didn't read books, and even the 'right' books, but I always felt that the ones I read couldn't be literature if only because I had read them. It was the books I couldn't get into (and these included most poetry) that constituted literature – or, rather, Literature. (*Poetry*:1)

The truism that literature can transport the reader 'to another place' is greeted with mistrust by Bennett – he states that from a very early stage, these 'other places' simply made reality (i.e. his own place) inadequate and not 'up to scratch': "Brought up in the provinces in the forties and fifties one learned early the valuable lesson that life is generally something that happens elsewhere." (*CTH*:39) Just as Bennett suspected there was something wrong with him, being intimidated rather than elated by 'Literature', he suspected that his environment was deficient in comparison to places described. Life (also with a capital 'L'), is therefore merrily going on elsewhere, while he, feeling short-changed, ponders on his deficiencies, resenting the allure of 'Literature' and 'Life', but wanting to be part of it all the same (see *WH*:3-13). Daphne Turner (1997:149) points out that 'elsewhere' invariably seemed to mean 'down south'. The reassertion of provincial values in literature through John Betjeman, Philip Larkin and the social realism of the 1960s had already begun when Bennett started asserting himself as a writer. However, only 'Life' associated with the London scene would produce the kind of 'Literature' he aspired to produce, and going south seemed both inevitable and a rite of passage. In retrospect, Bennett comments that his

own wish to escape was also anchored in his parents' lives, through books his mother read and his father's dream of living in the country (*WH*:8). This theme of escape was mirrored in works of writers such as H.G. Wells and J.B. Priestley (*ibid*).⁷

If Literature and Down South symbolised to Bennett places where life was to be found, it is hardly surprising that, as a young writer in *Beyond the Fringe* and *Forty Years On*, he used the language of literature and the south, and often exaggerated it and used it as parody. (Turner 1997:149)

The essay "The Treachery of Books" is a reflection on Bennett's childhood, mediated from his perspective of 1990.⁸ The essay is a personalised critique of the effects of 'Literature', allowing links with Harold Bloom's theories in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1975). Six revisionary movements in the strong poet's life-cycle present Bloom's model for "the way one poet deviates from another" (10-11). Influence, or "poetic misprision" (7) is about the desire to "wrestle with strong precursors" (5) and to emerge as a strong poet oneself. However, "self-appropriation involves the immense anxieties of indebtedness" (*ibid*). As Edward Young (cited in Bloom 1975: 27) states: "They [the great precursors] *engross* our attention, and so prevent a due inspection of ourselves; they *prejudice* our judgement in favor of their abilities, and so lessen the sense of our own; and they *intimidate* us with this

⁷ 'Asked to read *The Good Companions* for a possible production. I find I can only get as far as the end of Act I. It's interesting, though, in that it's Priestley on one of his favourite themes, that of escape and escape from the North particularly.

Act I, Scene I ends like this:

Leonard: Where yer going?

Oakroyd: (at door) Down south.

Exit to triumphant music from the gramophone.

And earlier:

Oakroyd: I'd like to go down south again. I'd like to have a look at...oh well...Bristol. I'd like to see...yer know...some of them places...Bedfordshire.

Oglethorpe: I nivver hear tell much o'that place; is there owt special I' Bedfordshire?

Oakroyd: I don't know but it's summat to see.

Which was my attitude exactly when I was 16. And my father's in 1944 when the family upped sticks and migrated disastrously from Leeds to Guildford for a year. In the end Oakroyd goes off to Canada, between Bedfordshire and Canada there not being much to choose.' (Diaries 1998. *LRB*, 21 Jan 1999) (Bennett in "Diaries 1998", *LRB*, 21 Jan 1999)

⁸ "The Treachery of Books" was first published in *The Independent on Sunday* in 1990, and was integrated into *Writing Home* in 1994.

splendour of their renown.” [...] “Poetic influence is thus a disease of self-consciousness.” (29). Within Bloom’s confines of ‘strong’ poets,⁹ Bennett might be a debatable choice, as he seems particularly afflicted by the intimidation caused by ‘the great precursors’. His development can, however, be connected to some of the models of influence suggested by Young above.

Firstly, Young states that great precursors “engross our attention and so prevent a due inspection of ourselves”. Bennett’s beginnings as an author are an example of both imitation and intimidation: as a parodist of other writers and particular styles. His very first piece of writing, produced for a Smoking Concert at Exeter College, Oxford, later became part of *Beyond the Fringe* under the title “Take a Pew” and was an accurate parody of a typical Anglican sermon. The revue also contained a satire and pastiche of some of Shakespeare’s plays, called “So That’s the Way You Like It”, a collaboration between Bennett, Cook, Moore and Miller.¹⁰ Bennett comments, discussing his early performance and writing work with Humphrey Carpenter (2000:29):

Art...begins with imitation, often in the form of parody, and it’s in the process of imitating the voices of others that one comes to learn the sound of one’s own.

Beyond the Fringe is generally seen as a breakthrough for the genre of the satirical revue, addressing contemporary politics and satirising public figures such as Harold MacMillan and ‘great’ writers.¹¹ Bennett’s first play, *Forty Years On* (1968), a text written around parody and intertextual references, was originally intended as a historical revue. It became a play about the history of an English Public School, Albion House, “a rough metaphor for England” (*WH*:314). It draws on a broad range of literary styles and introduces historical

⁹ ‘My concern is only with strong poets, major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death. Weaker talents idealize; figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves.’ (Bloom 1975:5)

¹⁰ See Humphrey Carpenter’s 2000 comprehensive study of satire in the 1960s and *Beyond the Fringe*’s part in its development and transformation.

¹¹ Satire: A writing in which the language or sentiment of an author is mimicked; especially, a kind of literary pleasantry, in which what is written on one subject is altered, and applied to another by way of burlesque; travesty. <<http://www.hyperdictionary.com/dictionary/parody>>; accessed April 2, 2003.

figures. The example in the style of Wilde is but one within a text overflowing with references:

Gerald: Good morning, Aunt Sedilia.
Lady D: The weather is immaterial. Gerald, do I detect a somewhat military note in your appearance? What is the reason for these warlike habiliments?
Gerald: I have been called to the Colours.
(*Plays I*:24)

It is clear that Bennett went through a period of imitating the voices of others before finding his own, although he has retained the ability to mimic other writers.

The next stage in a writer's development is described by Young as intimidation with "the splendour of great writers' renown", resulting in a "lessening of [one's] own worth." (in Bloom 1975:27) As discussed in Chapter 6, Bennett often presents himself as a literary outsider who has never managed to feel a sense of belonging to the many genres to which he contributes. In his earlier career, being a writer seemed to mean developing into someone who had to have the same effect on other readers as 'great' authors had on him, like gaining access to an exclusive (or elusive) club. T.S. Eliot's 1922 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" argues that writers can only develop their voice if they are aware of the trajectory that has led to their own production of literary work. Besides this literary intertextuality, Bennett describes and practises what could be called biographical intertextuality, comparing himself (his persona more than his works) with other writers, and being intimidated by the shadows they cast. Bennett's initial reaction in the face of 'great' writers was that of total submission, as he describes:

Auden's intellect was formidable and showy, and quite off-putting. As an undergraduate at Oxford in 1956, I happened to hear his inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry [...] Had I ambitions to write at that time, the lecture would have been enough to put me off. Auden listed all the accomplishments that poets and critics should properly have – a dream of Eden, an ideal landscape, favourite books, even, God help us, a passion for Icelandic sagas. If writing means passing this kind of kit inspection, I thought, one might as well forget it. (*Poetry*:5)

Bennett expresses feelings of inferiority in comparison to other writers' lives and works. From an early stage in his career, his frustration at constantly being overtaken by more eloquent, more deprived, more audacious or politically adept writers is evident: "With Shakespeare, whatever you do, you know that he has been there first."¹²

Just as 'Literature' devalues the events in his life, the towering figures of other writers devalue his own existence as a writer. The consequence seems to be self-deprecation. As discussed in Chapter 7, this gives the impression of Bennett perceiving himself as a "lucky amateur"¹³. Stephen Frears remarks on the compulsory modesty of Bennett's generation (see also Chapter 6). Bennett confirms this: "I seem always to be saying 'What am I doing here? I'm not a literary person at all.'" (*WH*:138). Bennett's upbringing suggests that modesty was an important virtue when he was young, and that he learned to exploit its potential in his persona (see also Chapter 6 – 'captatio benevolentiae'). It is assumed that on some occasions, Bennett reverts to the 'safe' pose of modesty and self-deprecation, which on other occasions is contradicted by his controlling attitude towards his works.¹⁴ Bennett's self-deprecation can exempt him from critical malice, as he will invariably have spoken about his contribution critically, thus pre-empting any negative view from others. Bennett's writing confirms Young's statement above that "Poetic influence is thus a disease of self-consciousness." (in Bloom 1975:29).

Bennett has tried to resist the label of 'literary person' for most of his career, and tries to avoid it in works that require him to be an expert on literature. This is evident in *Poetry in Motion* (Channel 4, 1990), a documentary series on the works and lives of twentieth century British poets, where Bennett assumes the role of 'mediator' between a popular audience and literature, which he is trying to protect from connotations of 'Literature'. The series is pitched at first time readers or at readers without much experience of poetry or

¹² Bennett, speaking in the programme *The Genius of Shakespeare*, BBC2, Nov. 6, 2002.

¹³ 'Frears and Bennett are in some ways very alike. They are both hard-working professionals pretending to be lucky amateurs [...].' In Hacker and Price 1991:156.

¹⁴ Examples: Bennett refuses most interviews, as journalists seldom 'get it right' (*Tales*:9), and exerts his right to approve casting, even of small parts, in his plays, as in the 2003 production of *MGIII* at West Yorkshire Playhouse.

literature. In his introduction, Bennett chooses a personal tone, stressing that he is not approaching his subject from a position of superiority: “feelings of impotence and exclusion still fresh in my mind” (*Poetry*:1). Bennett explains his choice of authors in the introduction: Thomas Hardy, A.E Housman, John Betjeman, W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice and Philip Larkin are among the most popular and widely read poets of the twentieth century. “Popular’ can connote ‘accessible’, but also ‘well known.’” Bennett reassures his audience that clarity does not mean simplicity, and obscurity does not always mean sophistication. It can mean ‘bafflement’, as pointed out through the example of W.H. Auden’s “celebrated obscurity” (Isherwood in *Poetry*:57). Bennett alleges that Auden hated rewriting, and thus often carelessly mixed individual lines that had met friends’ approval in one poem. Poets who are easily understood are met with critical snobbery (*Poetry* 1-2), once again underlining Bennett’s aim to overcome the intimidating effects of ‘Literature’ in *Poetry in Motion*.

Bennett can be said to have escaped the initial engrossment with other writers, although they are still a constant presence in his works, and often an inhibiting one. He has, however, developed a voice that is entirely his own, and instantly recognisable:

Patricia Routledge is only a couple of minutes into the monologue and you know it is by Alan Bennett. The style and tone are unmistakable. The acute ear for the banalities of everyday speech, the unerring social detail, the wry humour and the underlying sadness all evoke the singular Bennett world.¹⁵

Bennett has found ways in which to address feelings of exclusion, inadequacy and literary impotence. His later literary spoofs can be seen as a process of literary self-empowerment. Through ‘usurping’ the voices of other writers, he decreases the intimidation they cause in the process. A typically ‘Bennettian’ stylistic measure used in *Poetry in Motion* illustrates this. Bennett juxtaposes the notion of artistry with the mundane, obviously aiming to deconstruct the sublimity of some poems (metaphorically keeping the reader’s feet on the ground) by telling an anecdote about the writer before reading the poem. Thus, the reader

¹⁵ *The Times*, London, Oct 6, 1998 (also quoted in O’Mealy 200:xiv-xv).

of the poem “In Church” will be distracted by the image of its author, Thomas Hardy, reading the lesson in church after a long bicycle ride, his bald head gently steaming while he is reading (*Poetry*:9-10). Possibly as a reaction against what he sees as trivialisation of literature, Bennett will often juxtapose a writer and notions of literary ‘immortality’ with the small and parochial, creating a comic effect in the process. It is achieved by the surprise of the combination of the great name and the deliberately unglamorous characters in the same sentence. Thus, when Bennett presents his Auntie Kathleen, he describes her as very talkative and completely unable to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information. Everything that happened to her during a day of working in a shoe shop was recounted in “Proustian detail” (Bennett in Hunt 1993:21). Yoking together the sublime and the everyday occurrence, the juxtaposition of Auntie Kathleen and Proust is comically incongruous and full of bathos. Proust seems to be a particular favourite: in *Virginia Woolf I’m Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, the protagonist combines Proust’s surname with his own hated first name. ‘Trevor Proust’ is an example of this juxtaposition at its simplest. Not only does this approach show comic skill, it also demonstrates Bennett’s ability to juxtapose big ideas and small lives. Thus, in transferring Proustian or Kafkaesque moments to ordinary people, something ‘Bennettian’ is created. He uses classic authors to show his own ineptness at behaving in a way appropriate to a writer, as when he describes his feelings at helping Miss Shepherd, his eccentric lodger, with her car:

Though catch E.M. Foster taking time off from writing *Howard’s End* in order to fit an Exide battery into a clapped-out three-wheeler. (*Van*:54)

This raises the question of the associations ‘great’ authors evoke. They are used to impress in conversation, and there is a common unspoken agreement of what the mere mentioning of a writer’s name signifies. The authors that often appear in Bennett’s works can almost be seen as benchmarks, amalgamating the simplified contents of their works, their lives and their meaning to the individual who is writing or talking about them. People use the term ‘Kafkaesque’ even if they have not read Kafka, and understand what ‘Proustian’ means without having read *A la recherche du temps perdu*. This is an attempt to display cultural capital, or to prove that one is not afraid of Virginia Woolf.

The television play *Me! I'm Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (*Virginia Woolf* hereafter) is an exemplary text to provide an introduction to the presence of other authors in Bennett's plays. Directed and produced by Stephen Frears as part of a season of Bennett's plays for LWT, *Virginia Woolf* was screened in 1978, and published in 1985 in the volume *The Writer in Disguise*.¹⁶ Answering the question raised in Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), *Virginia Woolf* has a diffident protagonist, Trevor Hopkins. Chris Dunkley (*The Independent*) feels that for most of the play, "the text was actually contradicting" its "irresistible yet suspect" title: "the one thing that didn't seem to frighten Trevor Hopkins was the safely dead Virginia Woolf" (quoted in Silver 1999:152).

Hopkins, a polytechnic lecturer who hates his first name ("You're in the outside lane before even the pistol goes [...] Lenin, Stalin, where would they be if they'd been called Trevor?", *Virginia Woolf*:100), is played by Neville Smith. Stephen Frears has suggested that Smith was specifically cast for his physical and professional likeness to Bennett. Hopkins is accompanied by a voice-over, spoken by Bennett himself. This voice says what Hopkins really thinks, providing two levels of action: Hopkins' interaction with the outside world, and his 'inner' re-actions, as communicated to the viewer by Bennett's commentating voice. Even though Bennett had not formulated the framework of *The Writer in Disguise* when the play was produced (see Chapter 6), Frears refers to the character Trevor, a polytechnic lecturer, as the 'writer', and emphasises the deliberate closeness to Bennett, which makes the parallel with the 1999 text *Van* (see Chapter 8) even more pointed:

Stephen Frears: [...] Neville was a writer and an actor, and so he could play a writer in a way that actors quite often can't.¹⁷

Smith, in his role as Trevor, and also in his role as Bennett, personifies sentiments Bennett regularly expresses: 'la condition anglaise': embarrassment, coupled with feelings of

¹⁶ The plays are *Me! I'm Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *All Day on the Sands*, *One Fine Day*, *The Old Crowd*, *Afternoon Off*. The sixth play, *Doris and Doreen*, is published in the volume *Office Suite* (1981). They were all produced by Frears, who also directed three of them.

¹⁷ Interview with Stephen Frears, London, 31 December 2002.

displacement and isolation, or not belonging. Despite the fact that Hopkins is a lecturer, the assumption of confidence and competence is deconstructed by the character's passive, yet resentful presence. He has the analytical ability to see his shortcomings, but lacks the courage or initiative to change anything about his unsatisfactory situation. The play's visual style supports the impression of a hostile and uninspiring world through the drab, lacklustre surroundings, either dark or lit in unforgiving neon light.

Hopkins teaches an evening class of mature students of mixed abilities.¹⁸ In the farcical action within the classroom scene, the answers to the question the title asks are sometimes almost overlooked, but a picture of Virginia Woolf, anonymously decorated with a "large pair of tits and a moustache" (*Virginia Woolf*:49) is more than just a bit of fun. Silver points out the iconic status of Virginia Woolf:

Rather than being a countercultural icon, she [Woolf] becomes a sign of legitimate or official culture, and if not totally of the system, her suspect status resides more in her incarnation of Art, with a capital A, than in social rebellion. When combined with her class privilege, this designation would seem to render her work and perhaps her life alien if not meaningless to most of Hopkins' students. (Silver 1999:153-4)

The conflict between 'Art' and life (Silver spells 'Art' with a capital 'A', as Bennett does 'Life' and 'Literature') are shown in Hopkins' classroom through the icon of Virginia Woolf. She stands for sacrificing personal happiness for 'Literature' and for the literary intimidation implied in Albee's title, something that is easily felt when Hopkins tries to explain the Bloomsbury Group's upper-class radical intellectual approaches in a drab classroom on a murky evening in the provincial heart of 1970s northern England. Woolf's presence throughout the text, in the title, on the vandalised picture and in the form of a book which Hopkins carries around, creates a constant subtextual significance. There are subtle references to Woolf's ambivalent sexuality through Hopkins' sexual indifference, and his lack of courage to admit that he is unhappy as a heterosexual. His response to his

¹⁸ "I tell folks you're at the polytechnic and they think you teach woodwork", as Hopkins' mother puts it; (*Virginia Woolf*:42). It might be seen as an unusual statement, considering that Hopkins, like Bennett, is probably the first in his family to work in Higher Education.

mother's enquiry whether he is "one of those" is "Mam. I'm nothing, Mam". (*Virginia Woolf*:44) Hopkins' mother's dominance can be demonstrated within this small sentence, which has 'Mam' in it twice. 'I'm nothing' also means that Hopkins' feeling of inferiority prevents him from having a choice of sexual orientation, having instead to 'make do' with whoever will put up with him: "[...] he wanted someone who didn't want him, He had such a low opinion of himself that if someone wanted him that must mean that they weren't worth having." (*Virginia Woolf*:68) Trevor Hopkins and Bennett, the writer in disguise, are shown to have similarities. This can be seen, for example, by juxtaposing Hopkins' statement 'I'm nothing' with one of the few public comments made by Bennett about his sexuality. In response to Ian McKellen's question, at a National Theatre event against Clause 28, of whether he was homosexual, Bennett replied that that was "like asking a man crawling across a desert whether he preferred Malvern or Perrier" (Carpenter 2000:25-25). Trevor Hopkins loathes his partner, Wendy, a grotesque, who gets muesli in her hair and reels off esoteric clichés. She is mercilessly deconstructed, mainly by the voice over, as in this scene, where Wendy and Trevor are preparing to have sex:

Wendy:	As I see it the body is the basic syntax in the grammar of humanism.
Narrator:	(Voice over): Why did they have to wade through this every time? Other people got foreplay. All he got was <i>The Joys of Yoga</i> .
Wendy:	Where are you going?
Hopkins:	The lav. (<i>Virginia Woolf</i> :67)

This scene between Wendy and Trevor is a study in the loneliness ill-suited couples can experience in each other's company, and shows that Trevor is resigned to the fact that he cannot express his true thoughts or feelings. He thus conforms to the demands of his "pale life" (*Virginia Woolf*:69) where "literature wasn't much help" (93). Hopkins is deeply frustrated, bemoaning his lack of a meaningful existence, so often a theme in Bennett's plays from the period.

There is one student who symbolises everything that Hopkins would love to be, had he the courage ("Hopkins hated Skinner and longed to be him", *Virginia Woolf*:52). Skinner

symbolises the exciting choice, the breaking free that Hopkins longs for. ‘Coming out’ thus acquires a double meaning. One of them obviously refers to Hopkins potentially moving from the ‘nothing’ that has until now defined his sexuality.¹⁹ Another reading of ‘coming out’ might be the urge to escape an existence constructed solely around the avoidance of embarrassment. Hopkins wishes to participate in what Bennett always describes as ‘Living!’,²⁰ Skinner expresses interest in Hopkins throughout the play, and finally gets a smile back from him as the credits roll. This suggests Hopkins might be ready to pursue the life that has happened elsewhere until now. There is no other intra-textual indication of any relationship, but this moment of hope is extradiegetically accompanied by the song “I’m in Love with a Wonderful Guy”. According to Stephen Frears, Bennett had chosen the song purely for its music, obviously unaware of the lyrics.

Oh, of course, *Virginia Woolf* had all the gay stuff in it; and it had Derek Thompson in it [laughs]; and there’s all that stuff with *South Pacific* in it. Alan wrote that as music, and then I said ‘Wait ‘till you see the lyrics!’ [laughter] That was just a sort of accident – I had the soundtrack of the film, and I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.²¹

The song (from *South Pacific*, by Rogers & Hammerstein) has very ‘camp’ lyrics and provides a very powerful subtext to the scene, linking the two men, who are affectionately smiling at each other, in freeze frame:

[...]
I’m as trite and as gay as a daisy in May,
A cliché coming true!
I’m bromidic and bright as a moon-happy night,
Pouring light on the dew!

I’m as corny as Kansas in August,
High as a flag on the fourth of July!
If you’ll excuse an expression I use,
I’m in love, I’m in love, I’m in love, I’m in love
I’m in love with a wonderful guy!

(*Virginia Woolf*:72)

¹⁹ *Virginia Woolf* is widely accepted as a gay text, and has been screened at the NFT’s Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. Bennett himself has referred to it as a play that suddenly turns into a love story.

²⁰ Other examples: Mole in *The Wind in the Willows*, Dennis Midgley in *Intensive Care*.

²¹ Interview with Stephen Frears, London, 31 December 2002.

Skinner personifies everything that provides potential liberation. The 'coming out' issue is therefore only one of the ways out for Hopkins. Skinner also means 'confidence', 'outspokenness' and 'daring'. In short, he can do whatever he wants without fearing the consequences. Even more pertinently, Skinner knows how to 'live!' Hopkins, and Bennett, his puppet master, admire this quality in others, with a mixture of envy and attraction. Bennett's admiration for the boldness of other writers, Joe Orton for example, can be compared with the way Hopkins relates to Skinner. He is also the character who is most dismissive of 'Literature' as a template for a happy life, and as a manual for proper living. It is Skinner himself, not his views on writers, who ultimately offers the possibility of change in Hopkins' timid and frustrated life. Pointedly, it is Skinner who consigns the defaced portrait of Virginia Woolf to the wastepaper basket and who, in an almost sermon-like speech, delivers a verdict on the value of writers sacrificing their lives to art:

Skinner: It's council property. Well, love. Was it worth it? Look at the figures. Ten novels, five nervous breakdowns, no kids, one suicide. And this is where it's landed you, sweetheart: a further education class in the Mechanics' Institute, Halifax, on a wet Tuesday night in 1978. Let me introduce you, Virginia, old love. Here it is. Posterity. (*Puts her in the waste paper basket.*) You're sure you don't fancy that pint? (*Virginia Woolf:61-2*)

Juxtaposing 'great' writers with the everyday, ridiculous neutralises their powers of intimidation. Bennett expresses this need drastically through consigning Virginia Woolf to the wastepaper basket. One might interpret this as something he would personally like to do, but daren't, and thus gives the desired action to one of his characters. This is mirrored in the play, as lecturer Hopkins secretly applauds the symbolic dismissal of Woolf, but would not have the courage to actually say this, or commit such an act of iconoclasm himself. As Bennett has so often pointed out (*WH:xi*), the ability to 'live' or to mix easily does not come as a side-effect of being educated, but is a matter of personality and temperament. Embarrassment and heightened self-consciousness thus forbid Hopkins to act spontaneously or with ease. Skinner shows him a possible way out. The fact that the lives of the writers discussed in Hopkins' evening class suggest unhappy, sometimes unfulfilled lives manifests Skinner's point: writing is not necessarily 'worth it', and comes across as

sacrificing ‘life!’ for a pale replacement of the real thing. This is also underlined by a glimpse caught of another class next door to Hopkins’. Although the teacher is a bully, and the subject is Mechanical Drawing, the class is portrayed with an air of purpose, i.e. to enhance the participants’ qualifications.

Young, unemployed persons, the latest underprivileged group to the clasped to the dry bosom of the Welfare State. Creatures sunk in the trough of ignorance, lasciviousness, foolishness and despair. And from which there is one thing and one thing only that can deliver them, Hopkins. Literature, Hopkins? No. Virginia Woolf? No. Art? No. The one thing that will deliver them is their Higher National Certificate. But we shall not achieve it like this, my friend. Goodnight. (*He pushes HOPKINS out into the corridor*) (*Virginia Woolf*:55)

The play warns of the dangers of seeking answers or refuge in literature, when literature is so obviously linked with dysfunctional lives. Virginia Woolf committed suicide, E.M. Forster “wasn’t exactly Clint Eastwood” (*Virginia Woolf*:52), and Trevor Hopkins is trapped in Halifax, and with a partner of the ‘wrong’ gender who replaces foreplay with Yoga (*Virginia Woolf*:67). Does the play therefore really tell us that learning and intellectual achievement are a waste of time because their worth cannot be measured in financial terms?

The production of *Virginia Woolf* was driven by two men for whom knowledge, or ‘cleverness’, as they both seem to call it, *had* provided a career: Stephen Frears and Alan Bennett embarked on their television careers together in the early 1970s, and, although not part of the BBC’s graduate take up of ‘clever’ Cambridge trainees, they fared well, did not have to make big compromises, and prioritised having an enjoyable time during production, ‘larking about’:

Stephen Frears: [...] the whole BBC was like a public school, so larking about was part of it, trying to somehow get away with it. So, a lot of it in *Virginia Woolf* relates to that. There’s a rather wonderful Maths master who launches these attacks on art; we got immense pleasure from that, and from all the jokes. [...] So, being an artist was just an invitation to be pelted with abuse!²²

²² Interview with Stephen Frears, London, 31 December 2002.

The critics who distil an earnest message from the classroom-scenes in *Virginia Woolf* should be aware of the tongue-in-cheek quality of the work, and the nature of the jokes, some of them seemingly a way of getting back at pretentious contemporaries, who succumbed to “the myth of the artist’s life” (see below, *Kafka’s Dick*). Bennett attacks the idealisation of ‘Literature’, and those who see it as a cliché that will automatically enhance people’s lives. Texts like *Virginia Woolf* show that education and ‘Literature’ do not necessarily offer solutions. In this context, concepts of liberation through education sound cynical. Although Bennett has stated (*WH*:8) that education does not change someone’s personality and temperament, he does not deny its impact on his own life:

For Tony Harrison and for me, literature – or, at any rate, education – meant liberation. (*Poetry* 2:19)

It seems as though Bennett does not want his educational achievements to come between him and his audience. He might be afraid of the intimidation that Literature always created for him, or of distancing himself from his readers, or of being accused of ‘showing off’, as he was by his father when he was a child (see also Chapter 6). When Bennett was young and a gifted pupil, his ‘swotting’, as his parents called his reading, writing and revising, made him aspirational. Bennett was nurtured by a City, “underpinned and overseen by the Corporation” (*Tales*:90). City and Corporation left their stamp on him, more than he realised at the time.

This presence of the Corporation in our lives is constant and largely benevolent. A reasonable performance in Higher School Certificate or any acceptance by a university, means, for instance, that a boy or a girl is automatically awarded a scholarship by the city [which] educates its own and any award by a college or university [...] is topped up as a matter of course by the Corporation Education Department [...] The effect of this continuing Corporation presence is to instil even in the most heedless of its children a sense of belonging. (*Tales*:92)

5.3) Bennett, Larkin and Kafka

Despite this acceptance of his origins and his academic potential, in evidence from an early age, Bennett seems keen to emphasise his independence of ‘great’ literature. While discussing Ernest Kris and Otto Kurz’s book, *Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist*, Bennett links himself with the “tradition, in which the artists themselves conspire, of making a painter’s beginnings humbler and less sophisticated than in fact they were. The public liked to believe an artist had no training, that he astonished his elders, who picked out his skill when he was in lowly or unlikely circumstances.” (WH:138) Bennett acknowledges that he sometimes catches himself “slightly overstating my working class origins, taking my background down the social scale a peg or two” (WH:593). He implies he does the same with his literary credentials:

And so am I in my piece [for the Festschrift on the occasion of Larkin’s 60th birthday], claiming that I had little reading and no literary appreciation until I was in my thirties. This conveniently forgets the armfuls of books I used to take out of Headingley public library – Shaw, Anouilh, Toynbee, Christopher Fry. Many of the books, it’s true, I took for the look of them, and lots I didn’t even read, and those I did I’ve forgotten. Still I did read, though without knowing what I liked or was looking for, and certainly umpteen plays, but without ever thinking of becoming a playwright. This was the period from thirteen to sixteen, just before puberty, and I always wipe it from my mind. (WH:139)

Bennett’s recurring insistence that ‘Life was happening elsewhere’ reminds us of the much-quoted final line of Philip Larkin’s poem, “I Remember, I Remember”: “Nothing, like something, happens anywhere”. Philip Larkin has special significance in Bennett’s development as both an author and as an authorial persona. His poem “I Remember, I Remember” can be seen as a parody of Thomas Hood’s poem (1826) of the same name, which mourns lost childhood idyll and innocence. Larkin’s poem stubbornly refuses to glorify the past, and grimly rejects the nostalgia poets so often express for the lost paradise of childhood. Larkin’s “I Remember” resembles Bennett’s way of relating to his childhood, which has often resulted in the complaint that he was deprived in that he was *not* deprived, thus disadvantaged for a writing career. It is of course not deprivation of life’s essentials, wishing for poverty and hardship. ‘Deprivation’ in this context can be defined as a lack of

formative experience, adventure and excitement. Larkin cultivates the boredom that dominated the memory of his childhood:

[...]
'Was that,' my friend smiled, 'where you "have your roots"?'
No, only where my childhood was unspent,
I wanted to retort just where I started:

By now I've got the whole place clearly charted.
Our garden first: where I did not invent
Blinding theologies of flowers and fruits,
And wasn't spoken to by an old hat.
[...]
("I Remember, I Remember", Larkin 1988:81)²³

Both Larkin and Bennett have an ambivalent relationship with the past. On the one hand, they seem to understand that it is the main source for their work, but Larkin especially wishes to be free from the memory of his early years, once saying that his autobiography should start at 21 (quoted in Amis 1993:7). While Bennett did not include his past and his origins in his earlier works, they are now the most important themes in his work. Both he and Larkin use their past, but do not want to be tied down by verisimilitude. This explains their hostile response to those interpreting their work and researching their lives. Bennett writes about experiences he claims he did not have and Larkin omits the ones he *did* have.

Until I read Larkin - and in particular 'I remember, I remember' - I'd never imagined such experiences, or non-experiences, could be the stuff of poetry, still less the credentials for writing, or that anybody could write, not about the something but the nothing that happens anywhere. (*Poetry*:89)

Bennett pays tribute to Larkin for offering a way out of the problem of ordinariness, by confirming Bennett's feelings and making him feel more comfortable with the inevitability of an unspectacular background. Reading Larkin, appreciating that a good poem about failure could be a success, might have encouraged Bennett to venture into the intimidating world of authors. Although they were not spectacular, often positively banal, his formative

²³ See Appendix for the full texts of John Hood's poem 'I Remember, I Remember', and Larkin's poem of the same title.

experiences have turned out to be the spine of his work, be it his father always wearing black shoes, and drying his face so vigorously that it squeaked (*Tales*:47), or recollections of his mother going through phases of lampshade-making or crocheting (*Tales*:35). In his essay “The Treachery of Books” Bennett states he recognised his own provincial and ‘inadequate’ childhood in Larkin’s sentiments; neither Dickensian deprivation nor Blytonian bliss.

The families I read about were not like our family. (...) These families had dogs and gardens and lived in country towns equipped with thatched cottages and millstreams, where the children had adventures, saved lives, caught villains, and found treasures before coming home, tired but happy, to eat sumptuous teas of chequered tablecloths in low-beamed parlours presided over by comfortable pipe-smoking fathers and gentle aproned mothers, who were invariably referred to as Mummy and Daddy. (*WH*:4)

Idyll or misery would have ensured that Bennett, in his own view, was in possession of the biographical ‘prerequisites’ to be a writer. Bennett’s constantly recurring complaint about his ‘humdrum’ origins also becomes functional by opening up a discourse about these authorial prerequisites. Alan Bennett states he should be considered more deprived than Larkin, precisely because he did not suffer hardship. Another formative ‘qualification’ for authorship would have been an environment to rebel against. Larkin had this, with a Nazi-sympathising father and a mother whom he famously described as a “bloody rambling fool” (quoted in *WH*:548). Bennett’s parents aspired to normality, and provided a friendly and unassuming environment, but not one to draw out the rebel in their son. Bennett distinguished himself from his origins through educational achievements, and was not hindered by his parents, although his successes did not seem to attract much attention. Winning a scholarship necessitated a move away from his hometown. This, however, hardly constituted a rebellion.

Bennett’s essays on Larkin express admiration for the poet who is able to speak his mind without worrying about whom he might insult, a quality Bennett also recognises in writers like Osborne (*WH*:489). Larkin is referred to as a reassuring and inspiring influence, although there is still an element of intimidation in some of Bennett’s comments: “Even to

quote Larkin is to feel that anything I have said has been (un)said already and that his grumpy particularities far outsay my own.” (*Tales*:13). Reading Larkin, the concept of having one’s cake and eating it, or of being in two minds becomes apparent. Bennett’s comments on his tendency to, as he calls it, ‘do a Larkin’, finding resonances of Larkin’s condition in his own behaviour:

So, while half the audience are dining at Aske with the Zetlands, I am sitting in the Little Chef at Leeming Bar having baked beans on toast. Which is what I prefer, so it isn’t a grumble. But I catch myself here doing a Larkin (or being a man) – i.e. claiming I don’t want something, then chuntering about not getting it.
(*WH*:273)

A short exchange from Bennett’s play *Kafka’s Dick* (1986) helps further to establish Bennett’s literary connection with Philip Larkin: Franz Kafka has suddenly appeared in a house in a Leeds suburb in the 1980s, unaware of his posthumous fame. In the course of the action, he finds out he is a household name, due to his friend Max Brod’s ‘betrayal’ by failing to burn all of Kafka’s work after his death. Despite this sudden confrontation with literary immortality (an *adjective* is named after him!), Kafka shows an artist’s vanity: when he hears about Marcel Proust being “one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century”, despite being a “lifelong invalid”, Kafka retaliates:

Kafka: Oh shut up. Max. My room was noisy. It was next door to my parents. When I was trying to write I had to listen to them having sexual intercourse. I’m the one who needed the cork-lined room. And he’s the greatest writer of the twentieth century. Oh God. (*Kafka*:27)

Kafka is protective of what he sees as his domain: a writer’s illness and deprivation. Max Brod counters that it is not a special merit to be more ill than someone else: “What is this anyway? The TB-Olympics?” (*Kafka*:27) Bennett shows insight into the writer’s psyche in this exchange, but he nevertheless enters into competition with Philip Larkin about something normally considered undesirable: childhood deprivation and boring lives.

Still, to anyone, (I mean me) whose childhood was more sparsely accoutred with characters, Larkin’s insistence on its dullness is galling, if only in the ‘I should be so lucky’ principle. (*WH*:358)

Kafka, in Bennett's play, feels Proust's disease takes too much attention away from his own; and Bennett claims Larkin should not have the right to complain about deprivation: he should be grateful for it, as Bennett sees it as prerequisite for a writer's success in the market place. Sales figures seem to support Bennett's point:

Is there any way of avoiding the assumption that a miserable childhood is a prerequisite for a bestseller? It looks like the two are inextricably linked: the current bestseller list is comprised of a number of competitors in the 'my-childhood-was-more-miserable-than-yours' stakes.²⁴

Frank McCourt (*Angela's Ashes*, 1997) and Dave Pelzer (in a series of books on his childhood full of abuse and neglect, including *A Child Called It*) are but two examples which suggest that Bennett is right to make a link between the deprivation these authors write about, and their popular success and recognition. In his view, a childhood lacking these extremes is a serious obstacle for a writer who depends so much on the material his life has generated. Bennett's lack of a miserable or spectacular childhood has been expressed many times since *Kafka's Dick*, in journalistic works and in diary entries and, most recently, in *Telling Tales* and *Hymn*.

Art is pain. It must be. Otherwise it is not fair. (WH:385)

Kafka's Dick raises questions about the importance of the artist's origins, biographical myth, and the exaggerated importance of biography. The title sums up the play's disillusioned thesis on biography: readers do not want information about a writer's work, they want a shortcut to the reason of a writer's troubles, preferably a gossipy one. The play explores the bogus thesis of Kafka being sensitive about the size of his penis, which creates the necessary 'creative tension' for a 'troubled genius' and many other clichés relating to the 'myth of the artist's life' (*Kafka*:64). Bennett seems to include his own ambivalence about conventions of life writing and literary criticism in the play. Although *Kafka's Dick* can superficially be seen as an anti-biographical play, it is after all a play about a writer's

²⁴ Radio 4, *Front Row*, February 27, 2002.

life, and, parodic in tone, embarks on the biographical speculations Bennett has been shown to hate.

Perhaps *Kafka's Dick* is a farce because the importance of biography seems to Bennett so farcically exaggerated. The play has an absurd and often surreal setting which conveys the fact that literary criticism and biographical investigation can become absurd. In an environment where a tortoise turns into the long-deceased Kafka through Max Brod accidentally urinating on it, or where a policeman suddenly turns out to be Hermann Kafka, feared father of Franz, it seems logical that the size of Kafka's penis has more significance than his contribution to world literature. Bennett's choice of Kafka as a main character is inspired by his wish to challenge stereotypes. Kafka is certainly not famous for his sense of humour, yet it was a joke he made about his illness that sparked Bennett's interest. As Kafka is deprived of having his comic side acknowledged, it is a sympathetic gesture of another self-styled deprivation-sufferer to make him the hero of a comedy.

Kafka has further affinities with Bennett as a writer: the simultaneous craving for anonymity and fame, and the meticulous observation of people. The play suggests Bennett's discomfort about the myth of the artist's life eclipsing literary achievement, but also mocks the artist who cannot cope with the situation of being simultaneously the investigator and the investigated.

The other key issue of the play is the role of the artist's parents and of upbringing; relating Bennett's theory that deprivation is beneficial for a writer's career.

Hermann K: (...) a good father is a father you forget. (...) bad fathers are never forgotten. They jump out of the wardrobe. They hide under the bed. They come on as policemen. Sons never get rid of them. So long as my son's famous, I'm famous. I figure in all the biographies, I get invited to all the parties. I'm a bad father, so I'm, in the text.
(*Kafka*:61)

Bennett confesses to a "sneaking sympathy" for Hermann Kafka, one of the most notorious parents in world literature. If we follow the argument Bennett has set up for an artist's creativity to be fuelled by a miserable childhood, fathers like Hermann Kafka and Sydney

Larkin have to be thanked for supplying their sons with the ‘necessary’ deprivation and contributing to their literary success. Larkin's poem “This be the Verse” illustrates the debate about the function of a writer’s parents.

‘They fuck you up your Mum and Dad’ and if you’re planning on writing that’s probably a good thing. But if you are planning on writing and they haven’t fucked you up, well, you’ve got nothing to go on, so then they’ve fucked you up good and proper. (*Kafka*, Introduction:xiii)

Bennett’s sympathies are normally with characters with a bad reputation, often without a voice of their own to defend themselves: characters range from George III to the Cambridge Spies and Kenneth Halliwell, Joe Orton’s lover and murderer. While Hermann Kafka survives as the oppressive monster occupying a map of the world in a famous drawing by his son, it is not known how the real person relates to this image. Literary and public perception of Kafka’s father shows he has stopped being a person, having become a literary monument, just as his son has. In the play, Bennett shows how volatile public views are. One minute, Hermann K. behaves like the monster from Kafka’s works, the next minute he decides he wants to change his literary role to that of a loving parent and blackmails his reluctant son into hugging him (“Love me, you pillock!”, *Kafka*:47). This is commented on as “a breakthrough in Kafka studies” (Ibid) by the bogus-biographer Sydney who refuses to acknowledge what he sees – a son being bullied by his father – but chooses to interpret the situation in a way that enables him to launch a sensational publication. One can interpret Sydney’s behaviour as Bennett’s attack on critics’ and readers’ craving for biographical revelation. In *Kafka’s Dick*, Sydney is shown to be a possessive ‘fan’. He shares a profession with his hero, Franz Kafka, and, through connections forged between his life and that of the writer, assumes he has ownership and complete knowledge of the author’s life:

Sydney: (...) You wouldn’t have liked his stories. Not what you’d call ‘true to life’. A man turns into a cockroach. An ape lectures. Mice talk. He’d like me. We’ve got so much in common. He was in insurance. I’m in insurance. He had TB. I had TB. He didn’t like his name. I don’t like my name. I’m sure the only reason I drifted into insurance was because I was called Sydney. (*Kafka*:12)

Through the protagonist Kafka, Bennett shows how a myth and a real person can differ, and does not play along with the biographer's and the reader's game of finding parallels between oneself and the author. Adding to the anxiety of influence discussed earlier in this section, Bennett here shows the anxiety of interpretation or of biographical usurpation, and loss of control over his works. Sydney has a similar approach to Kafka as the couple described in the piece satirising fanclubs of the Bloomsbury Group.

Dilys and I are so gened up on Bloomsbury that Leonard and Virginia Woolf are just like friends of the family. I don't think Virginia would like that,' says Dilys – 'sitting in front of the fire cutting your toenails.' ("Say Cheese Virginia", in *WH*:595)

In *Kafka's Dick*, Bennett punishes the character Sydney by proving his anticipation of his relationship with Kafka wrong. Kafka, scared by the haunting of his enthusiastic host, wants nothing to do with him and instead turns to Sydney's wife Linda, who has never read any of his works ("When did you first get the writing bug then?" (*Kafka*:35), she asks him). Bennett allegedly identifies with the wish to seek partners without ambitions of being a 'writer's wife' and to associate with people without ambitions to 'understand' his work. According to Bennett, this was something that attracted Bennett to Anne Davies, with whom he had a long relationship:

And one enormous virtue was that she was not in the least interested in my work. She didn't want to be the artist's wife. And I like that, because I don't want to be explaining how far I got with it every day.' (Bennett quoted in Games 2001:249)

In a discussion of Bennett's writing, Stephen Moss has commented:

We love to categorize: Amis is the money-grabbing bloke who needed a big advance to fix his dodgy teeth; Stoppard is that clever fellow with a neat line in cod Shakespeare; Pinter is the chap who goes puce, tells journalists to fuck off, and is forever banging on about Iraq or the Kurds or the iniquities of US imperialism. We prefer idees fixes to ideas. (Stephen Moss in MacAfee 2002:162)

Kafka's Dick's main thesis seems to be the complaint that investigation is undertaken the wrong way round. Instead of looking at the artist's life for explanations of his work, the

works are explored to produce more information on the artist's life. As already discussed above, Bennett himself does this in nearly all his works on other writers. *Kafka's Dick* is a demonstration of biographical unreliability, and an invitation to be playful with others' lives, as long as it is understood that 'truth' cannot be a criterion. *Kafka's Dick* actually communicates the pleasure, of reader and biographer alike, in gossip, and the overpowering wish to make connections between one's own life and that of the object of investigation. Bennett demonstrates this in the following diary entry:

To read Kafka is to become aware of coincidence. [...] In my play Kafka is metamorphosed from a tortoise and is also sensitive about the size of his cock. So to find here, by the west door, a mosaic of a cock fighting a tortoise feels not quite an accident. (WH:208)

Kafka's Dick could be seen as a play that rejects outright biographical investigation and interest, but Bennett contradicts this apparent intention by drawing on gossip and speculation himself in his play. Biography is therefore not out of bounds, but rather, according to Bennett's ideas, should be approached in a reflective way that stresses its subjective use for the investigator, confirming the common thesis that biographical writing is at least as much about its writer as it is about its object. The genre is driven by the reader's need to believe that deprivation can be overcome, talent is not determined by financial or educational circumstances and that true talent will prevail. Bennett half confirms, half satirises the readership's need for fairytales in Sydney's monologue at the end of *Kafka's Dick*:

Sydney: And yet, in our heart of hearts, we know that like children we prefer the familiar stories, the tales we have been told before. And there is one story we never fail to like because it is always the same. The myth of the artist's life. How one struggled for years against poverty and indifference only to die and find himself famous. Another is a prodigy finding his way straight to the public's heart to be loved and celebrated while still young, but paying the price by dying and being forgotten. [...] He plunges from a bridge and she hits the bottle. Both of them paid. That is the myth. Art is not a gift, it is a transaction, and somewhere an account has to be settled. It may be in the gas oven, in front of a train or even at the altar [...] We prefer artists to die poor and forgotten, like Rembrandt, Mozart or Beethoven, none of whom did, quite. One reason why Kafka is so celebrated is because his life

conforms in every particular to what we have convinced ourselves an artist's life should be. [...] (*Kafka*:64)

All Bennett's works on other writers explore ideas around the myth of the artist's life. They abound with ideas, but also, quite openly, with contradictions and conflicts.

Bennett is simultaneously intimidated and inspired by other writers, showing awareness of both literary tradition and the need of an author to "make it new" (Ezra Pound). He acknowledges his audience's preference for autobiographical information, but rejects the assumptions about his private life that this brings. Bennett demonstrates ambivalence in the contradicting needs for recognition and for privacy, and in his apparent pleasure in gossiping, juxtaposed by the aim to be historically and biographically accurate.

Bennett acknowledges the contradictions in his arguments, as is apparent from the example below, showing that his northerness and his ambivalence might be linked:

The fact is, Northern writers like to have it both ways. They set their achievements against the squalor of their origins and gain points for transcendence, while at the same time asserting that northern life is richer and, in some undefined way, truer and more honest than a life of southern comfort. (*WH*:592)

6) Bennett's Selves

Discourses of anxiety and usurpation

This section aims to show how autobiography, at first marginal in Bennett's works, has come to dominate as a mode, or a collection of conventions. This development is seen as incremental, autobiography moving towards the centre of Bennett's works, at first gradually, then suddenly gathering pace and importance in the late 1990s. To demonstrate this formally unconventional phenomenon, this section's emphasis is specifically on Bennett's works written in forms not automatically associated with autobiography. In order to show the increasing 'degree' of autobiography in his works, changing stages in the author's self-representation are identified. The section also constructs a possible rationale for Bennett's autobiographical disclosures, based on analysis of Bennett's own, highly individualist conventions for the injection of autobiographical content into his work. The focus is not on exploring the way Bennett's autobiographical work relates to his life, but on the way he signifies his writing as autobiographical *texts* to the reader. This chapter does not consider autobiography from a formalist point of view.

Autobiography seems to be able to attach itself to every literary form. The increasing acceptance of autobiography's diverse formal manifestations means that writing about a life by simulating the chronological form of a life itself is just one of the possibilities on offer. It is important here to distinguish between the *conventional* form that autobiography takes, and the autobiographical *conventions* that are still at the centre of the mode today. For the purpose of this discussion, the 'conventional form' of autobiography is defined as follows. A famous or notorious person writes a chronological account of his/ her life from childhood to the present day, often starting with family history before birth. It is generally narrated in the first person, and written in prose. This is still the most popular and most lucrative way of selling a life to readers. Its structure is dictated by the structure of an individual life. Within the contemporary field of autobiography, the power of conventions (as opposed to rules) seems to be particularly strong. Raymond Williams (1968:12-13) defines the term:

Convention, in the act of coming together; an assembly, union; coalition, specially of representatives for some definite purpose; an agreement previous to a definite treaty; a custom. [...] The possible source of confusion is the fact that convention covers both tacit consent and accepted standards, and it is easy to see that the latter has often been understood as a set of formal rules.

The viability of talking about ‘conventions’ within the field of autobiography, rather than about ‘form’ or ‘genre’, which are defined by less flexible rules, is confirmed by critics such as Folkenflik (1993:16) who talks about “autobiographical generic conventions”.

Autobiography is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. (De Man in McQuillan 2001:74)

Some critics (such as Cockshut 1984:16) go against this by both using the term ‘form’, and maintaining there is such a thing as a ‘true autobiographer’. Although writing at a time when diverse occurrences of autobiographical conventions were already being examined, Cockshut works from the concept of an ‘ideal’ way of writing a life.

What can be described as autobiographic conventions? Jolly (2001:75) lists some points which distinguish the autobiographical, the self from a personal and historical perspective, from the ‘simple reportage’: autobiography should have a psychological and philosophical dimension that requires a writer to balance the deeds of an active public self with the thoughts of a contemplative narrative one. It requires its author to have an awareness of audience (autobiographical accounts differ distinctly from the purely private record of experience found in a diary or journal). Finally, autobiography is a literary form defined less by genre than by didactic intent

These characteristics are often ‘wrapped’ in the following conventions which refer to structure, narrative point of view and narrative strategy of autobiography, and could be interpreted as what Jolly above calls “clear formal conventions”:

[...] narration with its characteristics of pace and momentum; metaphors of self through which verbal patterns and bridges are constructed from narrative details;

description, reflection, argument, and meditation; and other common literary features, including characterization, dialogue, dramatic scenes and synecdoche. (Jolly 2001:75)

Not every autobiographical text draws on all these conventions, but every one of these conventions can give any text a degree of ‘autobiographicality’. Although there is “no way to bring autobiography to heel as a literary genre with its own proper form, terminology and observances” (Jay 1984:15), it can influence how another form is read, i.e. with or without the reader’s awareness of a ‘real’ life. The more autobiographical conventions can be identified, the more a particular work will move towards being seen as ‘conventional’ autobiography (this term is obviously not used in a derogatory way in this context).

It is the phenomenon of ‘separable’ autobiographical conventions, not ‘conventional’ autobiography, that is the emphasis of this study. It puts conventional autobiography to one side; on the other side it positions works which have one or several autobiographical conventions attached to them. These works still formally belong to categories such as ‘poetry’ (Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*), novel (Joyce’s, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*) or play (Bennett’s *The Lady in the Van*). These examples do not suddenly find themselves in the same category of autobiography, but there is a way in which their formal diversity can still exist with the *added characteristic* of autobiography. Their autobiographical setting distinguishes these works from others in their genres, but does not disqualify them from belonging to these genres. Jay (1984:21) states that works with strong autobiographical connotations often have a special position within their genre, transgressing it through their author’s self-confrontation.

As we have established the relativity of what may be ‘real’ and the impossibility of measuring truth, it is, as Jay points out above, ‘finally pointless’ to distinguish between ‘real’ and fictional autobiography for the purpose of this study. The way in which differentiations can be made is through determining the autobiographical degree in works not typical of conventional autobiography. Despite the changing face of what determines autobiography, the problem of ‘degree’ is not a new one, even if it has probably only been

mapped in modern times. Given the ‘normality’ of autobiographical elements, does the vast number of works qualifying present us with organisational problems? Even though De Man declares that “any text with a readable title-page is, to some extent, autobiographical” (Jay 1984:17), we need to be as precise as possible about the nature of that very extent.

The emphasis of this chapter lies on the flexibility of autobiographical conventions, which can give almost every text a degree of autobiographicality. This is the foundation on which I aim to develop the case for Alan Bennett’s integration of his own autobiographical conventions to a large variety of forms and genres, sometimes indirectly, sometimes (and increasingly) directly. The gradual increase of autobiography within Alan Bennett’s work takes place against the ‘backdrop’ of the expansion of what constitutes autobiographical conventions.

6.1) The Life in the Works: Introductions and prefaces

Richard Eyre (in Adams 2000:3) describes Bennett’s arrival at autobiographical concerns as

[...] the culmination of a familiar method. ‘Alan is very systematic in working the narrow seams of his raw material. There was a Kafka theme; a royalty theme; a spying theme, and in this portfolio there is also a file marked “Alan Bennett”. He approaches each of these subjects in the same way; he exhaustively mines his material for all it is worth.’

The method of investigation chosen here is informed by several possible categorisations of Bennett’s work: chronological, thematic, or by developments in different media. These three possible groupings interrelate, as the categorisations in existing critical works (Turner, Wolfe, O’Mealy) can co-exist: categories include media, and the division into northern and southern works, for example. Here, Bennett’s various introductions to his plays for stage and screen are discussed chronologically, focusing on the way Bennett represents his life and works in them.

It can be said that ‘autobiography’ in Bennett’s work constitutes both a chronological interaction between life and works, as well as one of the themes described by Eyre above. This evolution roughly follows a linear trajectory from earlier works which are not obviously personal to more recent pieces that seem obsessed with representations of the self. This self has never been restricted to one version alone, as Anderson points out:

The writing and rewriting of the self over a period of time, through constant revisions or serial modes, which was common across a range of autobiographical forms and writers before the nineteenth century, confounds the notion that there is one definitive or fixed version. (Anderson 2001:9)

For the last twenty years, Bennett has been ‘writing and rewriting his self’, and has also been rewriting his self in works that were written before he exposed parts of his life to public scrutiny. It is therefore not just important to look at the degree of autobiography in his work, but also at Bennett’s evolving perspectives of himself on page or stage. Corbett argues that autobiographical writing is a weapon for authors in countering the trend of post-structuralist analysis of texts:

Autobiography resituates the writer in his work, thus mitigating the dangers of the anonymity and the alienation of modern authorship: ‘The presence of his signature, the narrative unfolding of his history, inscribed the text as belonging to Wordsworth, who becomes “knowable” to his readers and inseparable from this text as a function of that self-representation’ (Corbett 1992, in Anderson 2001:8)

It is not only through the increasing amount of his life in Bennett’s work that his ‘presence’ and his ‘signature’ have attached themselves to his texts. Just as an animated Alan Bennett in the title sequence to *Talking Heads* signs off his work, audiences often comment that works bear his signature, and that his voice is unique. Bennett’s is one of the most recognisable voices among playwrights of his generation, and is inextricably linked with his public persona (see Chapter 7). Long before Bennett directly features in his texts, the reader feels s/he knows the author. This blurs the boundaries between directly autobiographical works and works that are written in the familiar Bennett voice, which gives the impression that they are brought onto the page straight from their author’s life. Even though we seem to know all about it, Bennett’s life is not something that obviously

features in his works in the early stages of his career. What might be called the foundational conflict, or the creative tension in Bennett's identity as an author, for example, is only revealed in 1994 in the introduction to *Writing Home* (ix - x), a long time after the incident took place: Bennett's father was a butcher, and Mrs Fletcher one of his clients to whom Bennett delivered meat. Her daughter, Valerie, worked for a London publisher, Faber & Faber, and later became T.S. Eliot's second wife. Bennett's mother once met Mrs Fletcher with an elegant gentleman she did not know, and Bennett realised later that his mother had been introduced to T.S. Eliot, although she did not know who he was when he explained the significance of the poet. Already torn between the bright lights of literary London and his 'authentic' Northern roots, Bennett uses his mother and T.S. Eliot as the exponents of the two worlds he has been torn between throughout his career: the provincial North, at first uninspiring, uneventful and breeding escapist fantasies, and the metropolitan South, promising fulfilment of intellectual and literary ambitions. This encounter¹ has provided an important interpretative subtext to Bennett's career, and an epiphany for a career self-consciously based on being in two minds. Bennett has retained a foot in both camps, writing in both the northern, 'the inner voice he hears most clearly', and in the southern voice, 'speaking properly', he has acquired through education and ambition. In critical literature,² this encounter between Bennett's mother and T.S. Eliot is given great significance as the defining myth of Bennett's persona. This geographical division is carried over into the works, which, until the early 1990s, had very clear modes of geography, register and genre (see also Chapter 4).

Bennett outlines the problem of integrating his northern voice into his writing: a sketch he wrote for the New York run of *Beyond the Fringe* about "The Northern Way of Death" was obviously so regionally specific to Yorkshire and its language that the New York audience did not understand it. The "stunned silence" of the American audience, proof that Bennett's northern writing was produced for a specific audience, made Bennett keep his native voice to himself, and it was over ten years before he wrote in a northern voice again, and twenty

¹ "In a Manner of Speaking" (*WH*:ix).

² Daphne Turner (1997:148), Peter Wolfe (1999:12), Delia Dick (1996:6).

years until he wrote anything northern for the stage (see *WH*:xiii). Clearly, he did not deem his life to be worthy or relevant as a source, so he wrote about what he thought was appropriate to write about. The standards set by other writers, or rather the imposing image Bennett had of them, served as a deterrent, as discussed in Chapter 5. Characteristically, Bennett took the route of the outsider, by simply doing what he felt he could do, and not following movements or trends. On the one hand, this was the marriage of history and theatre in *Forty Years On*, on the other hand, these were direct and unassuming stories of northern life, written in the language he had grown up listening to. Bennett started to produce television plays in the early 1970s, northern in content and register, very different from his other mode of production, stage plays. These plays would have invited autobiographical assumptions, which would have been unconfirmed at the time of their screening. It was not until the publication of *Writing Home* in 1994 that Bennett's contextualised his earlier work by illustrating its autobiographical background. Bennett's works of the 1960s and 1970s, often plays written in the voice of his childhood, thus become autobiographically relevant only in the context Bennett provides for them in retrospect. Should works like *Sunset Across the Bay* (1975) therefore be re-examined in the light of information that is released several decades later? Retrospective identification of autobiographical relevance is not uncommon within the field of autobiography. Olney remarks that "the great majority of works classifiable as autobiography were written under a host of different conventions all of which predate what we can only in hindsight begin to call 'autobiography'" (quoted in Jay 1984:15). When faced with the problem of declaring works as autobiographical only once the author has guided us towards this, Bennett's oeuvre offers a particular method. The key to determining the autobiographical quality of a text often lies in the prefaces. They are therefore the works that turn others into autobiographically relevant works. The loose chronology of the autobiographical development therefore continues with an overview and analysis of these prefaces as an approach to the works themselves, from the moment they acquire prominence as a way into Bennett's works, as from the late 1980s.

Bennett, ambivalent about whether to hide or to expose his life, has found a ‘third way’ – he exposes the life, but in the medium that precedes the *actual* work. Not every preface Bennett has written has been considered, and not every work Bennett has written has a preface. However, the selection is compiled to provide a sense of chronological autobiographical development.

Generally longer than modern playwrights’ introductions to their works (with the exception of G. B. Shaw), Bennett’s prefaces are heavy with historical, literary and personal context. What seems at first like a random collection of thoughts reveals itself as having manifold uses: Bennett provides us with contexts for plots and the language the plays are written in, and provides material which was cut from the play, or initial ideas from which he departed during the process of writing. Introductions also provide an opportunity for Bennett to comment on critics’ opinions, and to relive the time of writing and production of a particular play. Importantly, comparing plays published together in a volume makes Bennett aware of thematic and stylistic connections between plays in a season, and ways in which they reflect on his own life at that particular time.

Early in Bennett’s career, there are often substantial gaps between stage productions and their publication as play texts. An example: a collection of plays, most of which were shown in a ‘season’ in 1978/79 (see Chapter 4), was published under the title *The Writer in Disguise* in 1985. Bennett, when he edited the scripts for publication, stressed links between the plays, such as the protagonists of the plays resembling both each other and aspects of himself, the writer. He thus connected them with each other, more so than their director and producer, Stephen Frears, saw them as linked at the time of production:

Kara McKechnie: Bennett started with single plays like *Sunset Across the Bay*, and then moved on to seasons, loosely connected, such as *The Writer in Disguise*, even though they were only given that title in retrospect.

Stephen Frears: What was *The Writer in Disguise*?

Kara McKechnie: The six plays you did for LWT in the late 1970s.

Stephen Frears: They weren't called *The Writer in Disguise* at the time we did them. [...]...well, he [Bennett] wrote six plays! If he could have detected a theme in them. that would be clever, but I certainly couldn't.³

Thus, earlier plays formed more of an entity in published form than they did on screen. In the gap between screening and publication, the plays would acquire an important addition: a preface, and it is in these introductions that we can start identifying the way in which Bennett brings his life into his works. This is of significance especially in his earlier works, not identifiably autobiographical in their own right. Even in the late 1980s, there is still a marked contrast between the relatively autonomous texts (the *Talking Heads* monologues, for example, could stand without the detailed mapping of autobiographical sources in the introduction) and their 'confidential' preface, which allow a glimpse of the writer's technique.

Bennett's popularity ensured that the television plays were made available as published texts from the 1980s onwards. This started with *Objects of Affection* in 1982, and the scripts and tapes of *Talking Heads I, II* and *Telling Tales* became best sellers soon after they were broadcast. Introductions only became part of Bennett's works when there was a market for them, i.e. once connections are made between the author's life and his work, and the author may feel the need to steer these connections. One of the overall theses of this section is that the proportion of autobiography in Bennett's works grows throughout his career – at different speeds in different media. It might be assumed that the prefaces followed exactly the same pattern, where the degree of personal information revealed matches that of the work that is being introduced. However, this is not the case. The conventional autobiographical characteristics of 'chronology' cannot automatically be applied to the summary of Bennett's prefaces. As prefaces are often 'tagged on' to already existing works, for a long time, there is no automatic simultaneity between the writing of a work and the writing of its introduction.

³ Interview with Stephen Frears, London, 31 Dec. 2002.

Bennett's introductions form unconventional and at times seemingly reluctant instalments of his ongoing autobiography when looked at in their entirety. They take the work that is being introduced as their starting and focal point, but also supply snapshots of Bennett's professional and personal views around this text, often referring to the play's context in retrospect. James Naughtie⁴ calls *Writing Home*, a collection of these autobiographically oriented 'instalments', an "unorthodox autobiography". Just as Bennett's way of conveying his life alongside his works does not conform to conventional parameters of life-writing, an academic study of it has to abandon strict schemes of convention and consider unorthodox forms. Bennett himself points to the relevance of his prefaces in a letter sent to the author in 1995, stating that if one "read *Writing Home* and the introductions I've written to the various plays then that's about all there is to know".⁵ As Bennett points out in saying that they contain 'all there is to know' (not, notably, 'all one *needs* to know'), put together, the introductions form a series of autobiographical reflections, the information given in them protected by the place Bennett has chosen for them: with the play, but not part of it, referring to the play, but more often referring to the self. In the introduction to *Poetry in Motion* (1990), Bennett describes the 'dynamics' of readers making connections between the work they are reading and the life of its author:

With writers, people always imagine that what one writes is a censored version of one's life...that art is in the window and life is under the counter. (*Poetry*:2)

It is ironic that Bennett, describing this with slight disapproval, nevertheless puts his plays in the window and provides the under-the-counter information in the introduction. The introductions' autobiographical 'explicitness' can be interpreted as a deliberate way of pointing towards the autobiographical relevance of a work. While Bennett remarks that the "relationship between life and art is never as straightforward as the reader or the audience tends to imagine" (*CTH*:121), he is quick to supply evidence of the existence of that very relationship, even though there are departures from 'fact'. He does this, for example, by describing the real life models for characters and by elaborating on events that inspired

⁴ Interview with Alan Bennett, BBC Radio 4, Jan. 5, 2003.

⁵ Alan Bennett, Letter to Kara McKechnie, Sept. 1995.

plots. Bennett's window-and-counter technique assures the reader that connections between life and art are still strong, although they may not be straightforward.

The prefaces are an example of a well-balanced merger between personal and work, as can be seen from one of the earliest examples, *Objects of Affection* (1982). This volume contains a season of five northern television plays, together with three other single plays: Bennett's first play for television, *A Day Out*, the play *Intensive Care*, in which Bennett plays the protagonist himself and *An Englishman Abroad*, a play about one of the Cambridge Spies, Guy Burgess. The short preface to the volume of plays gives us insight into Bennett's confrontation with his approaching middle age, something that, according to Stephen Frears, left him with a melancholy which has led to the increasing 'bleakness' of his works. Bennett also expresses astonishment at his own preoccupations and repetitions, giving the impression that he is largely unaware of them while he is actually writing. This is echoed in later prefaces, where Bennett describes how characters sometimes take him by surprise with their actions while he is writing. The introduction to *Objects* also offers information on Bennett's approach to writing plays in the northern idiom. He tries furthermore to underline his awareness and avoidance of the clichés of northernness, a recurring theme which previously had found its way into plays such as *Enjoy* (1980).

I don't have any illusions about the north being more 'real', or think that it is like the muesli cake in *Intensive Care*, wholesome but gritty. (*Objects*:7)

A Private Function (1984) is based around food rationing and the illegal keeping of a pig in 1947, and it therefore seems appropriate to continue the shop metaphors when it comes to the work's relationship with its introduction. In the window, we find a very accurate period piece; under the counter, in the preface, we find the joint memories of the writer and the director: Bennett's father was a butcher during the period in which the film is set, and Malcolm Mowbray remembered an illegal pig lying in the bathtub of his in-laws in the same period (*Function*:7).

The publication of *The Writer in Disguise*, mentioned above, can be seen as part of Bennett's autobiographical evolution. In 1985, when the previously broadcast collection was published, Bennett was ready to admit that the television plays written and produced in the late 1970s had central characters which were variations of his self. John Russell Taylor (1979:117) states that the protagonists, whom Bennett links with 'the writer in disguise' display the mode of "the male menopause". George Philips in *One Fine Day*, for example, is shown to be "crumpled, listless neurotically inactive", not engaging or communicating with his family or his workplace, an estate agency. Shutting himself off from a world he cannot relate to, he secretly occupies an empty office-block. He is shown to be as alienated from his familiar environment as Lee, the Chinese waiter in *Afternoon Off*, who wanders through a northern seaside town in search of a girl he does not know, trying to relate to people whose language he does not speak.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, Bennett produced works that were centred on the lives of other writers: *The Insurance Man* (television), *Kafka's Dick* (stage), both 1986, *Prick Up Your Ears* (screenplay, 1987) and the documentary *Poetry in Motion* (1990). Again, the introductions legitimise the texts as works which are connected to Bennett, both personally and as an author. The introductions reveal Bennett's tendency to compare himself (not his writing, but his authorial persona) to these writers. Bennett sets the myth of a particular writer's life against his own research and analysis. The introductions on plays about other writers are also reflections on unhappiness as a price for literary success, a theme that is discussed in Chapter 5. Bennett's examination of the connections between (in the above case literary) lives and works is an emerging theme, which has by the mid-1980s started pointing towards his own life as the dominant source of his works. Accordingly, the preface to *Talking Heads I* (1988) is a study of the way life informs art in Bennett's work of the late 1980s. It is not about reproduction of his earlier life, but about events or situations, remarkable characteristics of a family members or throwaway remarks. Bennett explains how ideas for the monologues were triggered by small events: the vicar's wife and her scepticism and frustration with both her husband and his religion in *Bed Among the Lentils* were brought on by Bennett seeing "Get lost, Jesus" written in tiny, timid letters in a

School bible. He also furnished the monologue with the knowledge he had from going through a phase of fervent religiosity in his teens. These loose links function as the monologues' starting point, and open up the landscape, period, setting, atmosphere and register of Bennett's childhood and youth. Some of the characters of Bennett's childhood have contributed to the *Talking Heads* protagonists' creation: his parents and his aunts feature strongly in the inventory of catchphrases and typical situations. The introduction to *Talking Heads* offers encyclopaedic retracing of how people and incidents have found their way into the works, which at times seems like a declaration at customs, a theme that is taken up again in the introduction to *Talking Heads II*. If the reader considered the information offered by Bennett, the realisation of his technique should stop assumptions about the author simply putting himself and characters from his life on stage. However, these very assumptions are made about the Bennett, expressed through clichés of the 'flaxen-haired Northern lad from *Beyond the Fringe*'. While the preface to *Objects* sets the northern scene without giving much away about Bennett's place in it, *Writer* fills the reader in on similarities between protagonists and writer. In the *Talking Heads I* introduction, Bennett allows a detailed look into his origins and prepares the ground for our appreciation of the mannerisms, idiosyncrasies and the register he has adapted from his 1940s and 50s life.

The volume *Plays I* (1991)⁶ demonstrates Bennett's contextualisation of his life and works in retrospect. *Forty Years On* (1968) is described by Bennett as one of his happiest experiences in the theatre. Since it was his first play for the stage, he did not have to worry about audiences' and critics' preconceptions. Moreover, he was not confined to being the writer sitting in the stalls; he played the part of Tempest, a junior master. Thinking back on the rather less positive experience of *Getting On* (1971) three years later, Bennett uses the preface to set the record straight from his perspective (*Plays I*:14). The play, meant as a disillusioned portrait of a Labour MP, was changed by Kenneth More, who found it impossible to play a character disliked by the audience and thus turned the protagonist into

⁶ The volume comprises 4 plays, written and produced in 1968, 1971, 1973 and 1980. The preface was written when they were published by Faber & Faber as the first volume of Bennett's plays in 1991.

a likeable man (he played himself, essentially, Bennett remarked; 17) and the play into a comedy. Bennett accepted the *Evening Standard* Award for Best Comedy, remarking that it was similar to entering a marrow for a competition and receiving the cucumber prize (17). *Getting On* set a precedent, however, for Bennett using introductions to explain what a play was really meant to be like when he was conceiving it. This is especially important when a work's production has meant a significant departure from intentions. Directors have repeatedly stressed Bennett's flexibility and non-possessive attitude in production:

Peter Hall: I've worked with a lot of living dramatists, modern dramatists, [...] and they've been all – correctly – terribly protective of their plays. Alan, in a way, isn't. [...] after about a week's rehearsal [of *Kafka's Dick*], I rang him up and said 'The second act doesn't work, Alan.' And he said 'It never did.' And I said 'Well, don't you think you ought to come down and help us?' He said 'No, no, no, I don't know anything about it now and I mean, you know more about it than me, because you're in it and do what you think, I trust you, carry on!'⁷

This refers to a revival of a play, *Kafka's Dick*, in 1998. There seems to be – quite naturally - more protectiveness when it comes to a play being produced for the first time, as was the case with *Getting On*. According to Stephen Frears, the rift between Bennett and director Patrick Garland led to Garland being “stalinised” by Bennett, i.e. being removed as a friend, for a considerable time, and the hurt inflicted in 1971 still seemed fresh when the introduction was written for publication in 1985, some 14 years later.

From an early stage, Bennett also uses the prefaces for self-evaluation, expressing pleasure at having been able to write “an unnaturalistic play” (*Plays 1:14*): *Habeas Corpus* (1973). It seems that the plays held highest in his esteem are those that do not sound as if they were his (this phrase was used to describe the merits of the television play *The Old Crowd*).

I find I write naturalistically, while wanting to be much more impressionistic. It's partly through writing so much for television, and also my skills being weighted much more towards dialogue. I long to be more abstract, to play on an empty stage, and not to be trammelled by naturalistic considerations. (Bennett in Wu 2000:86)

⁷ Interview with Sir Peter Hall, London, Aug. 3, 1999.

Habeas Corpus is a farce that is both surreal (“Trousers fall, it is true, but in an instantaneous way as if by divine intervention”, *Plays 1:17*) and traditional, drawing on the music-hall tradition. It also deconstructs the genre of farce, without being too overtly critical of the form.

In summary, these functions can be noted for the introductions so far: contextualisation, evaluation, and the production’s relation to its original texts and intention. In the preface to *An Englishman Abroad*, a further function is added: Bennett says what he cannot or does not want to say in the play itself. Firstly, he gives the complete evolution of the play text, based on real events in 1958 Moscow. It began its life as a story told by the Australian actress Coral Browne, was made into a television play by Bennett, (John Schlesinger, 1987), and then adapted for the stage, as the first play in the coupling of one-act plays, *Single Spies*. The character of Coral Browne, played by the real Coral Browne in a plot she herself supplied Bennett with, sums up how many contemporaries of Burgess and other spies felt about the government’s reaction to them in exile. When a gent’s outfitter’s shop assistant refuses to make pyjamas for Guy Burgess, on the grounds of his being a traitor, she retorts:

Coral: You were quite happy to satisfy this client when he was one of the most notorious buggers in London and a drunkard into the bargain [...] But not any more. Oh no. Because the gentleman in question has shown himself to have some principles, principles which aren’t yours and, as a matter of interest, aren’t mine. [...] I tell you, it’s pricks like you that make me understand why he went. Thank Christ I’m not English.
(*Plays 1:298*)

The play is a clear expression on Bennett’s views on the case of Burgess and the government’s refusal to allow him to visit the UK in his later life. The preface is used to expand Bennett’s opinions in the debate on the Cambridge Spies, in accordance with his ‘character’ Brown’s opinion:

It suits governments to make treachery the crime of crimes, but the world is smaller than it was and to conceal information can be as culpable as to betray it. As I write evidence is emerging of a nuclear accident at Windscale in 1957, the full extent of

which was hidden from the public. Were the politicians and civil servants responsible for this less culpable than our Cambridge villains. Because for the spies it can at least be said that they were risking their own skins whereas the politicians were risking somebody else's. (*Plays I*:x-xi)

The introduction to the stage play *The Madness of George III* (1991) is a typical example of the general structure of most of Bennett's introductions. Bennett's life and its connection with the text he is introducing loosely holds the piece together. He always works from his own perspective, his connection with the subject and his approach to it. The microcosm of the introductions captures the macrocosm of Bennett's life while writing or working on the text. Thus, we are told why Bennett chose to write about King George III, after all one of the subjects of Walter Savage Landor's scathing poems about the Georges ("And what mortal ever heard/ Any good of George the Third?").

I've always had a soft spot for George III, starting all of forty years ago when I was in the sixth form at Leeds Modern School and reading for a scholarship to Cambridge. (*George III*:v)

Introductions like this, the first sentence of the preface to *George III*, invariably become a reminiscence about Bennett's own connection with the material – in this case, George III being the subject of an interview which secured Bennett a place at Sydney Sussex, Cambridge. And so the piece moves along organically from King George III to the Cambridge scholarship to National Service at Cambridge, to Oxford (chosen as Bennett had already been to Cambridge during his National Service) and Richard Pares, author of *George III and the Politicians*. New research on the King's condition, suspected to be porphyria, and anecdotal material rekindled Bennett's interest in the 1980s, and from there, he provides a smooth transition to the production process of the play for the National Theatre. Bennett also meets the reader's wish to know how authentic the historical characters in the play are by pointing out sources and references.

Greville [the King's equerry] is an historical character, his diary one of the most important sources for the history of the royal malady. However, Greville was not in attendance throughout as he is in the play. (*George III*:xiv)

Bennett's struggle between the accuracy of the historian and the theatrical pragmatism of the playwright, always detectable in his works based on 'real' history, is never more evident than in *George III*, and is often stressed in both the play's and the film's prefaces:

One casualty of the rewrites was strict historical truth. In the early versions of the play I had adhered pretty closely to the facts: the Prince of Wales, for instance, was originally a more genial character than presented here and more reluctant to have it admitted in public or in the press that his father might be mad. However the play works only if the antipathy between father and son, never far below the surface with all the Hanoverian kings, is sharpened and the Prince made less sympathetic. (*George III*:xi)

Since *George III* was largely shaped through its rehearsal process and the successful collaboration between Bennett, Hytner and the ensemble, its introduction offers a useful insight into the various draft-stages of the play. Bennett had already done two rewrites before the play received its first read-through:

[...] to sit and hear the play, knowing it was unfinished, was both depressing and embarrassing [...] When [...] we were able to run the play, it was immediately clear that while the course of the King's illness and recovery was plain and worked dramatically, the political crisis it brought with it lacked urgency. So the final bout of rewriting was only a couple of weeks before the play went on stage. (*George III*:xi)

While the decision to subordinate history to theatrical feasibility may not have been an easy one, the above example evidences Bennett's acute awareness of the stylistic and dramaturgical needs of various media he writes for. When *George III* was produced as a film, *The Madness of King George* (1994), the text of the stage play was again adapted according to the needs of the medium. It was also made more accessible for the American market, on which it depended for financial success. Bennett and Hytner have both been criticised for changing the scenographically more concentrated and simple stage text into a costume film in the British heritage tradition simply to satisfy the American's craving for all things British and royal. This overlooks the fact that both have commented on the necessary change in character as a consequence of the needs of film, by far a more 'impatient' medium than theatre.

All the stuff that's in the play had its equivalent cinematic scene, and we could only put half of it in (if that), because the movie audience is less patient than the theatre audience. (Nicholas Hytner in Wu 2000:108)

Hytner has also stated that he has a liking for texts that explore "big worlds, big communities [...] In a very vulgar way, I like showbiz." (*Platform Papers* 1994:15).

Bennett has confirmed their successful collaboration, praising Hytner's strong sense of theatricality, his flair and his "vulgarity" (Bennett in Wu 2000:81).⁸

Bennett's introduction exposes his own and the text's journey, making the reader aware of personal connections and the self-reflexive nature of his craftsmanship, as this very craftsmanship ensures the text does not draw attention to its quality. In informing us of the construction process, Bennett makes sure the reader is aware of the 'building work', not least by providing the stage text and the film script with two distinctively different introductions, taking on the roles of compère, education officer and critic in turn. The role of critic is unusual for a playwright's introduction, as the acts of introduction and assessment do not normally happen simultaneously. This may be explained in part by the different times a text for performance and a text for publication are prepared. Textual alterations, the crucial question whether something 'works' theatrically and the audience's reaction to the product of performance can all make their way into the preface. Thus, nearly all introductions include Bennett's self-assessment on his work, often describing his own and his text's shortcomings:

My theatrical imagination is pretty limited. It is all I can do to get characters on to the stage. Once they are there, I can never think of a compelling reason for them to leave – 'I think I'll go now' being the nearest I can get to dramatic urgency.
(*Willows*:xii)

Sometimes, as in the introduction to his first volume of stage plays, Bennett's acute sense of a work's and his own shortcomings (*Enjoy* in this case) are cleverly used to put critics in

⁸ Bennett has collaborated with Hytner on four projects: *Willows* (1990), *George III* (1991), *King George* (1994), *Van* (1999). They are currently preparing for the National Theatre premiere in May of Bennett's newest play, *The History Boys*.

their place, although his use of ‘I was told’ below lets us know that he claims not to read his reviews. The issue of control over life and texts will be addressed in detail below, but by being his own critic, even before the reader has moved on to the actual play’s text from the introduction, Bennett questions the other critic’s right to do what Bennett has already pointed out himself:

Of course there are things wrong with the play [*Enjoy*] – the title certainly; the drag maybe, particularly since it persuaded some critics that I cherished a shamefaced longing to climb into twin-set and pearls. James Fenton, I was told, even referred to the drag character as ‘the writer’. Mr Fenton’s subsequent abandonment of dramatic criticism to become the *Independent*’s correspondent in the Philippines was one of the more cheering developments in the theatre in the eighties, though when President Marcos claimed to be a much-misunderstood man I knew how he felt. (WH:327)

By the mid-1990s, introduction and play happen in ‘real time’, especially as, the more popular Bennett becomes, the more of an effort is made to have the scripts and the talking books in the shop at the time they are broadcast. The Bennett ‘brand’ ensures record sales numbers, with *Writing Home* topping the best seller lists for almost a year from autumn 1994 onwards, and still being a steady seller now, almost nine years later. It was ‘Book of the Month’ on BBC Radio 4 in December 2002, which illustrates its enduring popularity. The format of *Writing Home*, an autobiography in instalments of introductions and essays, as described above, has lent its template to the form of this section, illustrating its position within the chronology of autobiography. After the controlled exposure of *Writing Home*, Bennett had a very prominent public profile, although he grumpily dismisses the concept of celebrity:

It’s the press – and I don’t mean just the tabloids; the broadsheets are as bad – they are becoming increasingly infantile about any relationship – the justification is that, if you are a public figure, then you’re fair game. But what’s a public figure – someone who writes a book?⁹

⁹ Alan Bennett in *Book of the Month*, BBC Radio 4, Jan. 5, 2003. See Appendix for transcript of this interview.

Despite these reservations, the public's demand for personal information on Bennett has an effect on the nature and the length of Bennett's prefaces. With increasing status, Bennett will always take up the many questions put to him on the interrelation between life and works. In the introduction to *Talking Heads II* (1998), Bennett claims that "the playwright is not the best person to talk about his own work for the simple reason that he is often unaware of what he has written" (CTH:120). Bennett uses an analogy of the customs officer and the playwright's suitcase to explain this. The suitcase is a metaphor for his writer's inventory of associations, memories and preoccupations, the custom's officer stands for the examiner of the text (be it critics, audiences or academics). As the playwright passes through customs, he is asked to open his case. Convinced he has got nothing to hide, he is mortified to see the customs officer unpack one embarrassing item after the other: dirty washing (the idiomatic value not difficult to conclude), photographs, including one of the playwright smilingly showing his bottom to the camera

And so the embarrassing examination goes on, the searcher uncovering ever more outrageous items – ideas the playwright thought he had long since discarded, an old marriage, a dead teacher and even a body or two locked in a long forgotten embrace, none of which the playwright ever dreamed of packing but which somehow have found their way into this commodious suitcase, his play. (CTH:121)

Here, Bennett creates an interesting paradox: while actually talking about his work, he explains why he should *not* be talking about his work. In the same introduction he goes to great lengths to explain why he is "unavailable for comment" for people who write to him asking for a "low-down" or the "inner meaning" on the text (CTH:120). Despite these justifications, Bennett then provides thirteen pages of low-down. The introductions can be said to have the function of 'customs' in their controlled disclosure.

The suitcase-metaphor as an explanation of Bennett's technique of writing is enlightening as far as plays, short stories or scripts are concerned. It seems, however, to be less satisfactory when applied to the introductions of his plays. Here, introductions seem to be consciously engineered to provide what might have been missed in the actual works, and

they have an air of Bennett 'protesting too much' about the amount of reflection, structuring, research and intellectual analysis his works actually contain

We have established that the prefaces discussed so far 'personalise' the text that follows them, but that, if he wishes, Bennett can distance himself from this personalisation due to the formally separate, yet interconnected nature of the two. Gradually, however, the personal content, once restricted to the prefaces, merges with the plays themselves, so that recent works such as *The Lady in the Van* and its introduction have similar levels of personal information and confessional quality. More and more, Bennett uses the prefaces to tie himself in with his work. Bennett's works cross the watershed from indirect to direct autobiography in the late 1990s. Does this significant change, bringing the writer out of his obligatory disguise, mean that Bennett's prefaces lose their function of providing private information and assessing Bennett's life in relation to his works? On the one hand, it is easy to see the connection without being prompted, so it integrates the function the prefaces formerly held into the work. On the other hand, Bennett now uses his introductions (apart from the 'standard' ingredients, such as contextualisation and the production process) to outline how he, as author and as public persona, wishes to be seen. As the example of the introduction to *Telling Tales* (2000) shows, after the 'watershed' Bennett still feels the need to contextualise, explain and justify decisions made during the work on a text. In the 1980s, there were two main reasons why he was at odds with himself over the utilisation of his life: firstly, Bennett expressed feelings of inferiority about the lack of events and deprivation in his life. Secondly, he expressed feelings best entitled 'writer's guilt' about the ethics of the exploitation of real people's lives. Bennett has often quoted Kafka, who stated that "to write is to do the devil's work",

I take this to mean that anyone who dispassionately observes the sufferings of his or her fellows rather than straightforwardly trying to alleviate such sufferings is collaborating in the pain. Kafka died in 1922, fairly early in the history of news photography, where the dilemma is more crucially posed and where the first instinct to assist often has to take second place to the professional need to depict. (*Rolling Home*:vii)

Tales takes a new stand on this dilemma, this time not following Kafka, but Flannery O'Connor, who says of the dead that "they are more resilient than we think" (*Tales*:iv). In a later interview, Bennett talks about writing about his parents, and whether the revelation of family secrets constitutes a betrayal: "They [his parents] are both dead, and you can't go on subscribing to their views necessarily, simply out of respect. Philip Roth said that nobody is fully a writer until his father's dead. And in a sense, their deaths release you from obligations like that."¹⁰

The preface of *Telling Tales* shows that, while the apologetic tone prevails, Bennett seems more comfortable with the fact that his life has become the main source for his works, and clearly claims ownership of it.

These days the public is more interested in the lives of writers than in what they write, and it gets worse as you get older. [...]

The result is, unless you're quite canny, you are publicly debriefed of your life, spill all your memories, tell your favourite stories, and for what? The ambiguous reward of getting your face on the screen for half an hour. The inequity of this doesn't immediately occur, but it is inequitable. A writer's life is his or her raw material. To splurge it out in TV profiles, celebrations and interviews is in every sense of the word profitless. I have come to see it not merely as distasteful, but also as squandering. If there are tales to be told, I want to tell them and tell them unmediated. (*Tales*:9)

In recent years, the 'raw' material of his life has turned out to be Bennett's dominant source, confirming Richard Eyre's evaluation above, that the author "exhaustively mines his material for all it is worth". Whereas the focus until *Tales* had been firmly on childhood and youth, *The Lady in the Van* (1999) opened up the life-material to Bennett's adult life, if only one particular strand of it.

Tidy my desk, going through piles of papers accumulated during the rewrites and rehearsals of *The Lady in the Van* and feeling, as I often do when a play has been mounted, that it's slightly to the side of the play I wanted to write and that, now it's on, here among the cuts and alterations is the real play. (*Diaries* 2000:8)

¹⁰ Alan Bennett in *Book of the Month*, BBC Radio 4, Jan. 5, 2003.

This statement, with a sense of ‘life’ displaced into work, gives a strong indication of why Bennett writes prefaces at all. Bennett obviously wishes to retain a record of what he originally intended and planned for the text, which then had to give way to the all-encompassing demand of theatrical feasibility. This points to a distinction between Bennett the author and academic, and Bennett the theatre practitioner. It seems that Bennett sees his published texts to be vulnerable to misunderstanding outside their intended medium. Bennett, the academic, the conscientious researcher and the historian perhaps does not want to let a published piece stand without its evolution, falsified, as it must be, by the constraints of production. He thus equips it with a protective layer of explanation and contextualisation, keen to explain the work from all angles, and to be understood in the way he wants to be understood. This is a different matter on the stage or during a television or film shot, where the practitioner Bennett will succumb to ‘what works’. Experience across several media has also taught him the ephemeral nature of theatre, and that even work produced for the screen cannot always be guaranteed to survive¹¹. Even if it does, it will invariably move out of the audience’s focus. The two aspects of his work – that of performance or screening and that of published work - therefore stand apart, the latter acquiring even more distinction through the preface.

Bennett’s introductions have been growing increasingly longer (his first, *Green Forms*, is two pages long, in comparison with *Van*’s fifteen pages) and this means more justification and protective information. In structure and content, the introduction to *Van* is much like the prefaces discussed above, although it surpasses them both in length and in detail. *Van* in its different incarnations has a long textual history: it was read on the radio and published in diary form as part of *Writing Home*. Bennett then attempted to turn the material into a film script, but it was eventually produced for the stage in 1999. As the story is closely based on ‘what really happened’, every departure from the ‘facts’ or from realistic delivery (Miss Shepherd’s van’s ascension, the doubling of Alan Bennett) are justified and explained. This

¹¹ For example, all the tapes of Bennett’s 1966 BBC sitcom, *On the Margin*, are among the items ‘missing, believed wiped’.

is similar to the introductions to *George III* and *King George*, where the few departures from historical ‘fact’ are also justified and explained.

I am quite an unimaginative playwright and having studied to be a historian, I find it difficult to invent things, especially if I know they didn’t happen like that. It’s the same thing with *The Lady in the Van*, although one of the main themes of the play is the departure from what really happened. It all happened to me and I felt obliged not to change it.¹²

Writing about the past, but not ‘fictionalising enough’ is seen as a flaw by Bennett: “I often feel I’d be a better writer, or even that I’m not a proper writer because I don’t lie enough. Writers do lie, and it’s part of the job”.¹³ It can be assumed that Bennett left Oxford and a career as a history don behind to pursue writing in a field where one could invent one’s own history. It is almost ironic that he finds himself welded to ‘fact’ and to telling stories as they actually happened. But does he? In the case of *Van*, this may well be the case in Bennett’s own perception of the episodes involving himself and Miss Shepherd. However, the audience sees a doubled-up playwright, two halves, the split self, while Bennett is representing the ‘reality’ of his internal world. Hearing that the play is entirely built on ‘facts’ must seem confusing in the light of this novel and non-naturalistic device. Still, within Bennett’s own assessment of himself as a writer, there is a concern that there is not enough lying, because making stories up was seen as ‘showing off’ in his childhood.

In the introduction to *Van*, there is a strong sense of Bennett’s mounting anxiety about ownership and control of ‘facts’ and lives, and an urge for documentation of material that has been cut or edited from the play. Several omitted passages are thus quoted and contextualised in the introduction. Interestingly, the urge to justify the choice of material and nearly all the decisions made in the writing and production, which so far has mostly been confined to prefaces, diaries and autobiographical essays, seems to invade the play. Of course, this may be because the highly personal content of *Van* leaves Bennett feeling vulnerable, and strengthens the impulse to justify and defend himself.

¹² Notes taken in audience question and answer session, Platform *George III*, National Theatre, London, Nov. 16, 1999.

¹³ Alan Bennett in *Book of the Month*, Radio 4, Jan. 5, 2003.

The introduction and the play *Van* are not only similar in their levels of confession, but also in their sense of paranoia over the audience's understanding of the texts exactly as Bennett wants them to be understood. In the play, this is documented by the two Bennett characters being the commentators on their own lives, telling the story and guiding the audience's opinion on it. Bennett, speaking from behind his characters, seems deeply concerned about the way they - him - are received. As experience with his public persona has shown, there will be hardly any difference in the ways the audience perceives the play's characters and the author. Hence the constant efforts at self-justification in the play:

A. Bennett 2 Kind is so tame. Come on, help me. Couldn't it be anger? Social conscience? Guilt!

A. Bennett No.

A Bennett 2 Well, whatever it might be let us be plain about one thing: it can't be just being nice. Nice is so dull. (*Van*:28)

Similarly, in the preface, Bennett reveals his worry about not being understood in the way he wants to be through the sheer avalanche of information and the at times apologetic, guilt-ridden, at times defensive, pre-emptive tone. The worries do not stop there: Bennett fears that, *will* he be understood, his 'self' will be mocked as self-pitying and reactionary.

[...] though the play covers a period of twenty years during which there were some startling changes in fashion (flares, for instance), these changes are not reflected in the Alan Bennetts, who remain the same throughout. This, too, is not just a production device but a fair reflection of the facts. (*Van*:4)

Van is a very confessional text, but also a very controlled one. This is reflected in its introduction, where the sense that the play is Bennett's attempt to have his cake (reveal his own story, and manifest his ambiguity), eat it (still remain enigmatic about presenting the whole truth about himself) and, of course, write about it.

6.2) Critical Assessment

While this discussion has established the general patterns and structures of Bennett's prefaces, it has not addressed the possible rationale behind the carefully managed information in the pieces. Statements such as "I felt that whatever one says about a work of art can never outsay what the work of art says about itself." (Bennett in Wu 2000:79) make the reader wonder why Bennett produces introductions complementing the works at all. What could thus motivate Bennett's anticipating of possible questions about the writing and the production's work in progress?

If Bennett's introductions were produced for television, they would resemble documentaries on the making of a particular drama or film. Like these documentaries, the introductions are generated by the demands of an audience that takes an interest that goes beyond the 'primary' product, the play or the film in question. The introductions might also be compared to an opinionated pre-show talk or post-show discussion in the theatre. It might be assumed from Bennett's ready supply of answers and explanations that he sees the audience's and readership's interest as legitimate. Yet, Bennett has expressed discontentment with the audience's curiosity with what is 'under the counter':

[...] few writers enjoy being grilled about their text, hoping that they've made themselves clear, and if they haven't, that's saying something, too. (*Poetry*:2)

If he practised as he preached, Bennett would let his works stand for themselves, and not explain every step of the process that led to the finished work, including material omitted from the end-product. Critics have noticed Bennett's unresolved ambiguity between his urge of wanting to talk about his work and his resenting the audience's and readers' interest 'beyond' the writing:

On the one hand, he's notoriously shy, stuffing his privacy like a snotty hanky up the sleeve of his Yorkshire parka; on the other, diligent biographers like Alexander Games can fill 300 pages with quotes from old Bennett interviews. (Preston 2001:15)

Bennett might have practical reasons for answering these questions once and for all by making them readily available in an introduction. In providing such a comprehensive introduction to his works, Bennett could be seen as acting as a moderator between his work and its audience, and sometimes deliberately positioning himself (or his persona) in between the play text and its introduction, guiding the reader's perception of his work. It might be seen as hypocritical that Bennett, 'protesting too much', claims not to want any revelation, but provides revelations himself throughout the 1990s. It is here not seen as paradoxical that a decision was obviously made that henceforth the only personal information would come from Bennett, in his own terms, at a time set by himself and in his own form and wording. This leads to the conclusion that to Bennett, retaining ownership of his life, and of his self within his texts, is of great importance.

It could be argued that one of the desires that is encoded by autobiography is that of becoming [...] one's own progenitor, of assuming authorship of one's own life. (Anderson 2001:67-8)

It seems as though Bennett has decided that his life was his capital, and that his exclusive 'ownership' of his own life means he has material to write about, as well as financial revenue ("besides, one has to make a living"¹⁴). Autobiography is therefore sold as something the public demands, and which the author (seemingly grudgingly) provides, preferring to do it himself, before the invaders (the biographers, the journalists, the academics) get it wrong. Bennett the biographer knows the impulse of biographical investigation and the literary (read unreliable) editing of information the construction of somebody else's life involves. In rejecting a steady number of biographers and academics 'doing' him (Bennett used this expression talking to a journalist from the *Independent*, who was writing his profile: "you're doing me"), Bennett has made clear that he does not wish to receive the biographer's treatment. This reaction, well documented in prefaces and essays, is in line with what Jürgen Schläger (in Batchelor 1995:57) describes as follows:

¹⁴ Alan Bennett in *Book of the Month*, Radio 4, Jan. 5, 2003.

[...] Biography [...] is a discourse of usurpation. The truth-criterion does not consist in the authenticity of an inside view but in the consistency of the narrative and the explanatory power of the arguments.

Bennett's decision to bring his life out of its former protective disguise seems like a charging forward out of the realisation that a controlled *autobiographical* output might keep biographical usurpation at bay. This explains Bennett's seemingly illogical reaction to the increasing demand of revelation: detailed introductions are like pre-emptive strikes, Bennett acting on his fear of being exposed by others through exposing himself on his own terms:

Ultimately, autobiography is a discourse of anxiety. Autobiographers have to be true to themselves and true to the image they would like to present to the public or to posterity. Very often these two obligations are extremely difficult to reconcile. (Schläger in Batchelor 1995:57 ff.)

Bennett is therefore fighting off the biographical usurpation, and trading it in for exposing his life in a discourse of anxiety. This exposure does not seem to come out of a spirit of confidence, but it can be understood when one realises the importance it carries for Bennett to tell his own story according to how he wishes his life to be presented.

It is important to understand that the trauma of 'uncontrolled' exposure is transferred to his works from encounters in Bennett's life. In *Writing Home* and in a 2000 memoir, "Untold Stories", Bennett's parents' are given a role in determining this fear of exposure and discovery: his mother could not cope with the notion of being 'the centre-piece'. On occasions where this was inevitably the case, such as the time before her wedding, or after a move to a small Dales village, she experienced serious episodes of depression and delusion. Bennett's father enforced the idea that exposure equalled 'showing off' by showing dislike for Bennett demonstrating intelligence and inquisitiveness as a child, and doubting he was telling the truth on a number of occasions. Additionally, Bennett had to cope with several traumatic occurrences of exposure himself:

There is the morning ten days before the end of my National Service when a sergeant in the Intelligence Corps at Maresfield makes me scrub out a urinal with my bare hands; another when a consultant at the Radcliffe Infirmary (a Mr Corrie)

discusses my naked body without reference to me with his class of smirking medical students; [...] (*Untold Stories*:16)

Bennett uses this encounter as a model for a very similar scene in his television play *The Insurance Man* (*Plays* 2:127), where the protagonist Franz, naked and worried about his mystery disease, is the centrepiece of a medical examination in front of an audience of students and colleagues. Nobody involves Franz, or acknowledges him beyond his function as a demonstration object, until he grows hysterical under the strain of the situation, and with shame at his exposure. Bennett has experienced exposure of people close to him (the press's 'hounding' of Russell Harty before his death, for example), and has been the victim of tabloid exposure himself (the uproar the *Daily Mail* caused by revealing Bennett's and Anne Davies' heterosexual affair, for example). Bennett has stated that he has felt exposed by overly simple connections made about the way he presents his life in his works. It is therefore believed that Bennett has attempted a solution of 'controlled exposure' in order to regain artistic control over his life. Through providing this information, Bennett has chosen to be a "stripper" rather than a "hider" (see Schläger in Batchelor 1995:58). Referring back to the image signifying the wrong kind of exposure, the medical examination in *The Insurance Man*, Bennett metaphorically strips out of his own accord, at a pace and in a style that suit him, rather than having his clothes taken off by force. He therefore volunteers his technique, his motivation for writing the piece that is to follow, and, above all, his opinions and evaluations of his own work. That this takes place outside the actual piece, or is at least formally separate from it, could be seen as another safety measure – at least this information is not inside the actual work he is preparing the reader for. Thus exposed, Bennett awaits judgement by his reader, and it is hardly surprising that, in order to get a reaction of understanding and sympathy, this reader has to be furnished with as much knowledge, rationale and gossip as can be managed.

The tone and content of the prefaces confirm the thesis of Bennett's autobiographical writings as a discourse of anxiety. This feeling runs through all Bennett's prefaces, some of which offer the distinct impression that a man who finds it tortuous to talk about himself

has been driven to do so because misrepresentation (equalling biographical usurpation) might seem a worse prospect than autobiographical exposure.

The contents of Bennett's prefaces pre-empt the personal and confessional material of later autobiographical works such as *Van*, sometimes by many years. It must be assumed that, for Bennett, the prefaces must be a 'safe' place, if he chooses to undergo rigorous self-scrutiny in full view of the reader. In doing so, he strengthens his position when facing critics of his work: he will normally have pointed out mistakes before any critic can do so, or will have collated critical views that were formulated when the work (particularly a play or a film) was first shown without its protective framework. The in-between status of the prefaces contributes to the thesis of their relative safety: Bennett smuggles in personal revelations, but they can always be claimed as not being part of the *actual* work, giving the author space for ambiguity.

It is difficult to find a work of Bennett's that does not come with an explanation of the reasons for its shortcomings. The inherent apology can be compared to the classical rhetorical figure of 'captatio benevolentiae'. It translates as 'the capturing of [the audience's] benevolence'. The speaker or author points out the shortcomings of his work, in the hope the audience will have sympathy. One of the most well known examples for captatio benevolentiae is the beginning of *Henry V*, where the Chorus introduces the scene by apologising for its sparseness.¹⁵ Apart from the introductory function of the Chorus's

¹⁵ But pardon, gentles all,
The flat unraised spirits that hath dar'd
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
So great an object. Can this cockpit hold
The vast fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?
O, pardon! since a crooked figure may
Attest in little place a million;
[...]
Admit me Chorus to this history;
Who, prologue-like, your humble patience pray,
Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play.
(*Henry V*, Prologue)

words, there is a clear sense of lowering expectations, and gaining sympathy in return. Often, *captatio benevolentiae* has an air of ‘tongue in cheek’ about it. This is evident from the example above: an audience will not come to the theatre expecting ‘the vast fields of France’, so there will be no disappointment in receiving the address by the Chorus, but more a sense of flattery (‘benevolence’) at being spoken to with such reverence, and being asked to kindly accept what has been produced for their entertainment.

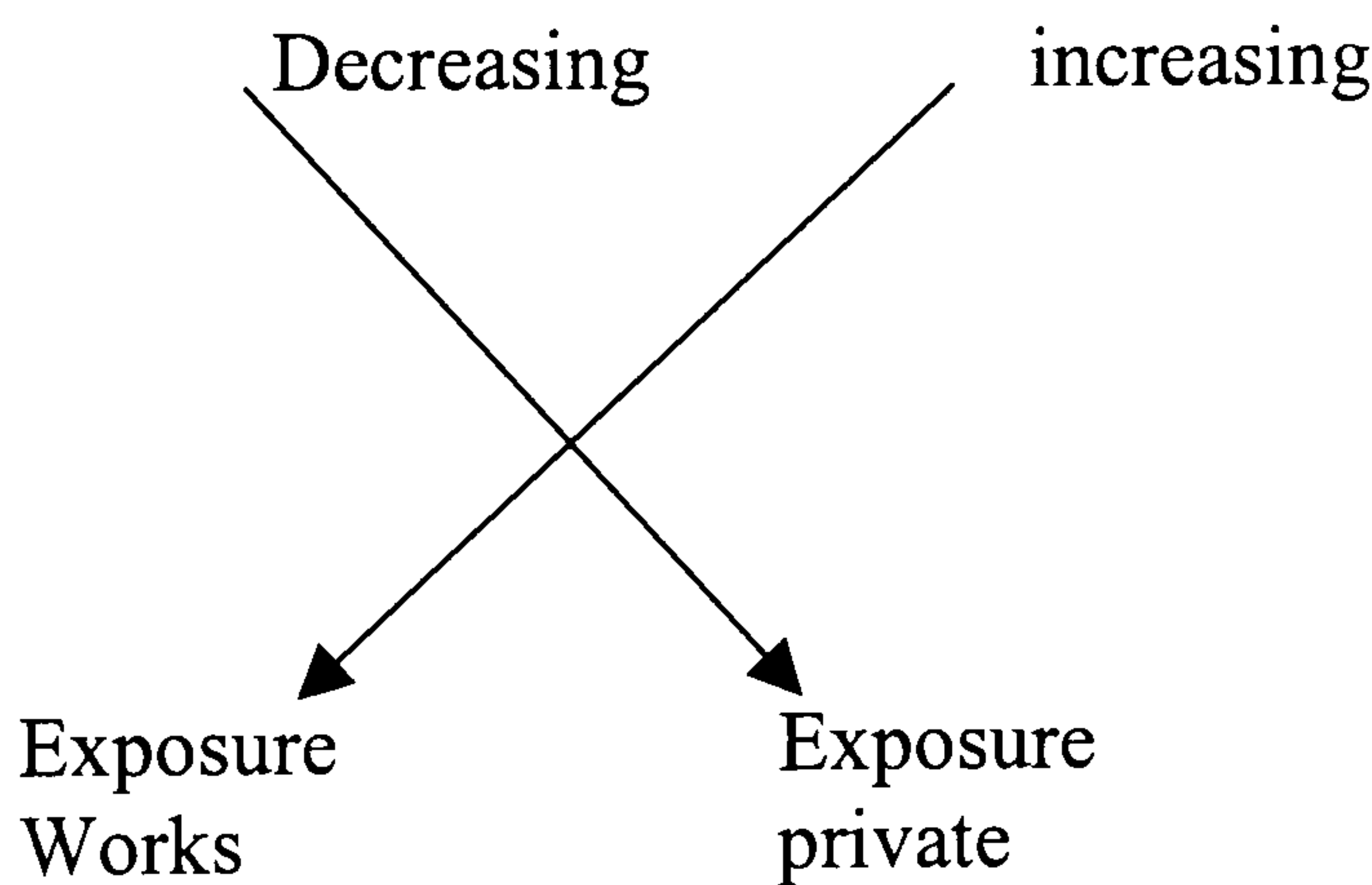
As Stephen Frears points out,¹⁶ the understanding of the importance of modesty to Bennett’s generation is paramount to the understanding of the self-deprecating tone of Bennett talking about himself: “That generation was brought up to be self-effacing, modest and not to take themselves too seriously”. Talking about oneself is seen as ‘showing off’, so if one *does* talk about oneself, one must dismiss it as unimportant. Coming back to Bennett, this does not, however, mean that one wants others to take that line, too. Frears remembers Bennett talking to a journalist about *A Day Out*, his first television play. Bennett described it as “not very much”, which was replicated by the journalist in his article, causing frustration with writer and director. One of the characteristics of *captatio benevolentiae* is therefore something which might be prosaically paraphrased as ‘fishing for compliments’. The rationale is that, because of modest delivery, the personal vanity of the artist clears the way for admiration of the actual *work*.

Formally, it can be argued that Bennett loosely follows the classical pattern of *captatio benevolentiae*, which, in an epos or in a play, normally occurs at the beginning of the work. Bennett’s use of the figure occurs in the introduction to a piece, which might be compared to the way the Chorus is placed in *Henry V*. An example: at a platform presentation of *George III* at the National Theatre, Bennett said how he had always felt pleasure and excitement when, at the very beginning of the play, the King and Queen and their Court came down the enormous staircase centre stage. After he had finished, there was a brief pause, after which he said in a cheerful tone “Not that that had anything to do with me, of

¹⁶ Interview with Stephen Frears, London, Dec. 31, 2002.

course.”¹⁷ It was this cheerfulness and the routine delivery of the phrase that hinted at the possibility that this was a well-practised way in which Bennett ruled out any kind of conceptions of him as ‘aloof’ or a ‘show off’. He made sure the audience’s sympathy was captured. In interview, both Peter Hall and Stephen Frears immediately dismissed suggestions of Bennett declaring his inferiority through these frequent put-downs of himself, Frears explaining that “it suits him to see himself that way”.

As shown, Bennett is in two minds about letting a work speak for itself, and about the reader’s and the author’s need for contextualisation. Furthermore, the amount of ‘life’ Bennett exposes in his works seems to be increasing (‘stripping’), while his collaboration with investigators of his life and the part it plays in his art is decreasing (‘hiding’). Closely interdependent, the two tendencies move in opposite directions. We can visualise this by applying the Chiasmus model of connected opposite movement (Greek: “a placing crosswise,” from the name of the Gr. letter “chi”); which expresses the tension between Bennett’s urge for self-revelation and secrecy



¹⁷ Platform *George III*, National Theatre, London, Nov. 16, 1999.

The same model cannot be applied to summarise the case of Bennett's collected prefaces in the context of the larger autobiographical development. The two interrelate in that the weight of the personal is much more on the prefaces than on the actual work to begin with. With the continuing personalisation of the actual works, this balance starts changing, and, at the time of *Van*, both play and preface carry different areas of autobiographical content: the play carries the actual life-related narrative, the preface carries its context and justifications for it being written in the way it is.

It is suggested in summary that Bennett's life writing does not prioritise the narration of events as they really happened, but the fact that he wants to tell his story in his own way, unmediated. Judging from the statement below, The Life of the Bennett persona and Alan Bennett's 'real' life differ:

Well, I have often found that the people who've got closest to me are the ones who've never read a word I've written. Books are a barrier. (Bennett in Wu 2000:94)

Bennett's autobiographical discourses can be seen to enforce ownership of a life that almost works as a shield to ward off intruders threatening to usurp his 'real' life. Thus, the autobiographical trajectory of Bennett's career moves towards finding creative solutions that allow his life as source, but avoid being judged on it.

7) Public Image and Private Self

‘What is she really like?’
(recurring question addressed to
Anthony Blunt, referring to the
Queen, in Alan Bennett, *A Question
of Attribution*)

‘Have you met him yet? What’s he
really like?’
(recurring question asked about
PhD on Alan Bennett)

This chapter explores the image the public has of Bennett through journalistic and biographical sources. Furthermore, it focuses on ways in which Bennett fashions his public persona and the way in which Bennett’s persona is integrated in his works.

What makes Alan Bennett’s stylish and witty diaries so remarkable is that this ostentatiously diffident and private playwright has turned himself into a public act. Alan Bennett is having a fantastic success playing Alan Bennett. (Buruma 1995: n. pag.)

As established in previous sections, Bennett has a very pronounced presence inside and outside his works. This chapter focuses on the notion of his public, authorial self, especially with regard to his writing with direct or indirect autobiographical content.

I’d rather the public had an image, and not quite fit it. That way, you’re free
(Bennett in Adams 2000:3).

This quotation implies that Alan Bennett sees his public and his private selves as separate. Moreover, he encourages the fact that there is a public image of himself, which he feels his ‘real self’ does not match. From an early stage, the concept of self plays a part in Bennett’s work, as he comments on the contradiction of acquiring a voice through education in order to ‘speak properly’, but still being urged to ‘be himself’ by his family. This seems to imply that he should not stand out from his surroundings, and should effectively deny the changes brought about by education and career (*WH*:xii-xiii).

Somehow, we do manage to become our own persons over the course of time; we find that we become able to ‘just be ourselves’ rather than the imitative, other-driven beings we used to be. This is largely what is meant by the idea of identity. But isn’t it also clear that the self [...] is an idealization, an imaginary vision of completion? Can we ever really become the authors of our own actions, our own selves? (Freeman 1993:66-67)

Freeman suggests that an identity is defined through being distinctive of others and relatively independent of former influences, but also concedes that identity cannot be finite, nor can it be separated from the influences that have shaped it.¹ This therefore impacts on the practice of representing one’s own self in writing, as demonstrated in the previous section. We learn through imitation, and this process is particularly significant for authors, acquiring a voice of their own after imitating the voices of others.

Is it more convenient to claim to have two selves – one private and one public – rather than conceding that there is no such fixture as a self? Does this mean that there only has to be one fixture – the public self – and the other can be the true, liberated self? Bennett, always interested in concepts of self-representation, has made a contribution to this discussion with his 1999 play *The Lady in the Van*, discussed in Chapter 8.

The construction of Bennett’s public self can partly be attributed to the fact that ‘lay’ readers assume an identity between an author as a person, a narrator and an autobiographical subject. Alan Bennett and his public persona are an example of an author who creates an assumed authentic self through writing and performing.

7.1) The Author as Sign

This section aims to differentiate between the authorial self, or the ‘I’, following the definition below, and the representation of self, which is named ‘the persona’, or the ‘me’. An author has an intra- and extra-textual presence within his/her work, particularly in works with autobiographical content. The intra-textual presence is defined by the way the self is portrayed within the text (and then contextualised by the

¹ David Hume (*A Treatise on Human Nature*, 1739-40) states that the idea of a self ‘beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity’ is fictitious, due to the absence of constant impression, and the fluctuation of influence. (quoted in Freeman 1993:69)

recipient), the extra-textual presence is a more complex concept, which depends strongly on the recipient's knowledge of the author.

In the course of interacting with others, we form both an "I" and a "Me". [...] The "I" is the spontaneous part of the self, always restless and impulsive. It is not a content, but a movement. The "me", on the other hand, is the self that is created by the response of the other. The "I" then responds to the "me" and a never-ending conversation ensues which accounts for both the novelty and consistency that can be observed in any person's self (Brissett & Edgley:15/ 16)

It is argued here that Bennett's persona exists at first extra-textually, in his public life, outside his works. In the late 1970s, he starts producing work in which he draws from his background, and introduces protagonists who share some of the characteristics of his persona. As the persona is perceived to be Bennett, the characters analogous to the persona will be interpreted as being the author. There is evidence in Bennett's diaries and prefaces that he has resigned himself to the fact that his work will be perceived as autobiographical, even if this is not always the intention. Gradually, notions of a more playful approach to his public self become apparent, and there is a fluid transition between in the intra-textual and the extra-textual Bennett persona. By the turn of the century, Bennett seems to have changed his approach to his stereotypical persona, seeing it as a safe mask, behind which he can 'be free'.² The Bennett persona is not synonymous with the author, but not an entirely fictional character either.

The file marked 'Alan Bennett' contains the familiar version of himself that the playwright wants his audience to know, and perhaps to love. (Adams 2000:3)

As already seen in the introduction, Bennett evokes associations such as 'unthreatening', and as someone who produces 'anecdotal keepsakes' (see also Adams 2000:3). Bennett himself has described his presence as "heartfelt, but dull" (*WH*:408), and as bound to be disappointed by a world that is not on his side. He is seen as 'clever', but also as self-deprecating, and arguably, his intelligence becomes more acceptable to a broad audience. Bennett learned this lesson when he was a child: if one was clever and showed it, one risked not being liked. Bennett has a familiar look, a mixture of Oxford don and Yorkshire clergyman, which has hardly changed since he became a public

² This development should be read parallel to those outlined in Chapters 3 and 4.

figure. His voice is also very familiar, with its slightly nasal, wry quality and characteristic inflection at the end of a sentence.

Bennett is far from inimitable, as *Dead Ringers* proves, but he is irreplaceable. Without him, well, it wouldn't be Christmas. (Sexton 2001:20)

Although this quotation implies Bennett's cosy familiarity, he has enough intellectual credential and distancing sarcasm not to succumb to clichés of northern wholesomeness. Bennett gives the impression of someone who secretly longs to break free from the restraints his personality and his environment impose, and who is consequently drawn to people more bold and daring than himself. While suffering embarrassment and constant self-scrutiny, Bennett has expressed admiration for the 'cheek' of, for example, his friend Russell Harty, which he describes as a form of courage (Bennett in Thomson 1995:25). Thomson (Ibid) comments that "the yearning for cheek, or outrage, is often there in his [Bennett's] gentle, chatty prose."

The difference between the writer and his/ her self-representation can be clarified by using the semiotic concept of the relationship between the signifier and the signified, first formulated by Saussure.³ A signifier, a symbol, represents the signified, a concept. Sometimes the signifier will have little visual connection with the signified. There can be an arbitrary relationship between the components of a sign, established by convention and made valid by the mutually shared knowledge of its recipients. In other cases, and these are the ones of interest here, signifiers and signified will have a close visual or conceptual relationship. An analogy can be drawn between a figurative sign and the relationship between the authorial self and the authorial persona: like Margritte's pipe, a picture of a pipe, but not a pipe, the signified (the person Bennett) and the signifier (the persona Bennett) have a very close resemblance, but are not necessarily identical. What is called the authorial sign here has a figurative character, with signifier and signified easily confused by the recipient, who may believe that persona and person are identical. The difference between person and its representation, the persona, is a theoretical agreement, which is often overruled in practice.

³ The main reference used here is <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/semiotic.html>, Daniel Chandler, accessed on Oct. 18, 2002.

Saussure's model does not include the active participation of a recipient or an audience. For this, the triangular model first introduced by Charles Sanderson Peirce presents a more accurate picture, as the authorial persona is a phenomenon that depends heavily on reception.⁴ There is evidence that the persona, the sign vehicle, becomes dominant over the person, the referent, in the semiotic relationship. As discussed above, a figurative sign, with a close connection to its signified is more likely to be mistaken for 'the real thing'. Transferring this to the authorial sign, the persona thus often performs an act of mimicry of the person in the reading of the recipient. This is evident in Bennett's case, where the form of the sign, the persona, is given a particular sense by its recipient, who thinks it 'stands for' the real Bennett. The triangulation is continued by the influence the recipient's reading has on Bennett's self-presentation in his writing. An authorial sign, the persona, is therefore jointly created by the author and by the recipient of a text, and thus a mixture of self-portrayal and outside perception. One of these two factors may dominate: on the author's side, the perception will be influenced by how closed or open the signifier, the persona, is allowed to be, and how deeply these encodings are buried within the text. The way in which these encodings are decoded depends on the competence of the recipient; and the previous knowledge of life and works will determine expectations and associations.

While the signifier and the signified traditionally determine each other in equal measure, the post-modern age has seen the possible split between the two parts of a sign. In what can be described as an uncoupling of the signifier from the concept it refers to, the signifier gains more prominence, and the line of what is meaning and what is sign becomes increasingly blurred.⁵ The post-modern trend of switching of levels, and the favouring of the image over its concept is something that can be applied to the interpretation of Alan Bennett and his persona. It is an example for the audience's confusion between signifier and signified, the perception of the representation as being

⁴ The model depends on a similarly empowered sender and recipient, where the referent (i.e. the signifier that evokes the concept of the signified) depends on a mutually agreed language. Its three components are
The Sign vehicle: the form of the sign;

Sense: the sense made of the sign;

Referent: what the sign 'stands for'.

⁵ For example, Jean Baudrillard (1995) has stated that the Gulf War (i.e. the signified) might not actually have taken place, as the evidence rested on signifiers (media images), which might have been constructed.

real. Bennett has recently started playing with the notion of what is supposedly his real self and what is a construction by an audience interested mainly in a writer's life as reflected in art. The persona's mimicry of 'the real Alan Bennett', its acceptance and recognisability, prove the post-modern thesis of the image's dominance over the concept it represents.

An observation of Bennett as an Oxford Undergraduate shows that the author might have been aware from early on in his career that there were different versions of his self he could adopt:

Alan Bennett was not, in short, some student Garbo; he was, from the word go, a performer who – onstage and off – played versions of himself. The shrinking, querulous diffidence which made his vicar from *Beyond the Fringe* an instant classic was just a part of his act. (Preston 2001:15)

This underlines the performative quality of the Bennett persona, and it is on this kind of performance of the self that behaviourists focus. In analogy with Bennett's pronounced interest in the dramaturgical school of behaviourism and in particular Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, it is not the focus of investigation whether Bennett is being 'true to himself'. The focus of the analysis is his performance of himself. Bennett's persona passes as him, but is compared to a mask, made to look like his own face. This idea is transferred to some of his protagonists, which results in them being able to manipulate their persona in their favour:

If I wore a mask, it was to be exactly what I seemed.
(Guy Burgess in *Englishman*:9)

Eyre comments (see Introduction) on Bennett's alignment of the writer and the spy, and Guy Burgess and Anthony Blunt, two of the Cambridge Spies, exemplify this notion very clearly in *An Englishman Abroad* and *A Question of Attribution*.

HMQ: Portraits are supposed to be frightfully self-revealing, aren't they? Have you had your portrait painted?

Blunt: No, Ma'am.

HMQ: So we don't know whether you have a secret self. (*Spies*:47)

Characters in these plays need the secret identity to be able to be themselves, and need a mask to 'be free'. Eyre expands this group including spies and writers to many other Bennett plays evolving around the idea of a secret self, and the outer self as fake, performance or façade.

The less a public persona *seems* like an invention, the more successfully will the 'real' author be able to hide behind it. It is therefore significant that Bennett chose to name a volume of plays *The Writer in Disguise*. This title appeared retrospectively, when the plays were published in 1985, after first being shown in 1978 and 1979 on LWT. This is the first time that Bennett 'officially' acknowledges parallels between himself and his protagonists. So, through declaring them as a disguised version of himself, he partly comes out of the disguise, as Daphne Turner (1997:110) also points out. Bennett describes the characters thus:

Passive, dejected, at odds with themselves, they are that old friend, the Writer in Disguise. A doleful presence, whatever his get-up, he slips apologetically in and out of scenes being heartfelt, while the rest of the cast, who are invariably more fun (and more fun to write, too), get on with the business of living. (*Writer*:9)

These protagonists are versions of the Bennett persona, or variations on the same character. Even in a directly autobiographical text, *The Lady in the Van*, he states that it is wrong to assume that the two Bennetts represent the two halves of his persona, preferring them to be seen as 'parts of his personality' (*Van*:xxii; see also Chapter 8). Several of the *Writer* characters are trapped in their particular situations for want of confidence, company or charisma. Although, as protagonists, they are central to the action, they do not move it, but are passively moved along by it. They are outsiders and observers of the ease with which others master 'living', unable to participate in everyday life and to belong. If at all, these characters can only be themselves when nobody is watching. In public, they attempt to perform a self they feel is expected of them. As a writer who portrays other people's lives, Bennett similarly sees himself as unable to participate in life,⁶ as this comparison between himself and the protagonist of *Intensive Care* shows:

⁶ For a more detailed discussion on the writer as outsider, see Chapter 5.

I deliberately write myself out of my own work. In this case, though, Gavin hasn't been able to find anyone else to play the part, so here I am. It is a hard job because I have written myself very few lines, something I regularly do with the central character. Supporting parts I don't find difficult, either to invent or to supply with dialogue; the central character is a blank, a puzzle, and one which I hope the actor will solve for me. But now the actor is me and I don't know what to do. (*WH*:167)

The loneliness of the observer makes the writer successful, and also has a part in the construction of the central character, the Bennett persona, which is always "being a spectator on the sidelines" rather than "being a player in the game" (Brissett & Edgley 1990:40). Bennett also links his characters' escapist impulse with his own wish to escape, and with his frustration at the inability to perform in a way that allows him to feel at ease. His trapped protagonists⁷ are central to the dramatic action, over which they have no control. They do not act, they react.

7.2) The Meaning of Seeming

[...] the most revealing insights to be gleaned about human beings lie simply in a close look at what is right on the surface. Appearance is real. You can learn a good deal about a book by its cover. We do it every day. Indeed, it is often all we have. (Brissett & Edgley 1990:36)

The term 'Dramaturgy' is of Greek origin, roughly translatable as 'the making of Drama',⁸ and, within the field of sociology is the study of the creation of meaning. It specifically looks at how human beings accomplish meaning in their lives through behaving (performing) in a way will produce a particular perception or result (Brissett & Edgley 1990:2). It is believed that "the meaning of people's doings is to be found in the manner in which they express themselves in the interaction with similarly expressive others." (Brissett & Edgley:3). The research environments seem to differ at first: theatrical dramaturgy is undertaken in the context of an 'artificial' performance, sociological dramaturgy refers to 'real' human behaviour, but the edges become blurred

⁷ Hopkins in *Me! I'm Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, Lee in *Afternoon Off*, Phillips in *One Fine Day* (all in *The Writer in Disguise*); Midgley in *Intensive Care* (in *Objects of Affection*); Graham in *A Chip in the Sugar* (*Talking Heads I*).

⁸ 'Dramaturgy' can refer to a discipline within the performing arts, concerned with the way the action is constructed and how the story of a play is told. Within a theatrical context, Dramaturgs are collaborators in the production team and create meaning and contextual information.

if human behaviour is seen as a performative act, and theatre is seen as a stylised way of linking these behavioural efforts at establishing meaning and drawing on context.

Behaviour is led by the need to express oneself in a certain way in order to give the recipient a certain impression. Accordingly, the behaviour will be performed in order to be understood or read in the intended way, just as it would happen in a play. Following on from the Peirce-model above, a similar model can be constructed for the principle of dramaturgical analysis:



The dramaturgical principle involves the reading of signifiers (a particular kind of behaviour) and their association with concepts signified (what is ‘intended’ by the person behaving in a certain way), and is therefore closely related to semiotics. Within the science of the sign, however, it is more important that a sign is *read* as a sign than whether it is *intended* as a sign. This is different in the dramaturgical school of thought, as it is mainly concerned with the conscious presentation of self according to a certain intention. Veltrusky (in Aston and Savona 1991:8) states that “Everything that is on stage is a sign”. Dramaturgy can, therefore, be compared to semiotics of performance, where the principle of an intended, conscious sign is assumed. Everything that is on stage gains the character of a heightened sign, because intention is assumed by the recipient. ‘Real’ life does not always offer the certainty that signs are intended. The authorial sign has characteristics of the heightened or artificial sign. This does not mean that everything related to persona is intentional, but rather that there will be a greater readiness on the part of the recipient to *assume* this intentionality.

Human behaviour that involves recipients is, according to this approach, impression-management (Brissett & Edgley 1990:17). The self is not seen as an entity, but as the meaning created from the process of self-expression (Brisset & Edgley 1990:16), and is

established only in interaction with the recipient. “It is in the doings, not the minds and hearts, that selves emerge.” (Brissett & Edgley 1990:18)

The impression-management that is undertaken to establish a self and the impression-management undertaken to establish an authorial persona have obvious parallels, as both take place in the knowledge that meaning will be read into behaviour, ideally the meaning that the constructor intends.

The concept of being and seeming is of great significance both in the construction and in the reading of Bennett’s works. His interest often evolves around the ways in which ‘being oneself’ and ‘seeming oneself’ differ. Works such as *George III* or the documentary *Dinner at Noon* explore the principle of behaviour as performance, although Goffman’s theses are often an undercurrent rather than a clear theory put into practice. The use of Bennett’s two voices, the ‘original’ voice of his upbringing and the voice acquired through education, can also be read as part of Bennett’s examination of the difference between ‘being yourself’ and ‘seeming yourself’. This section thus discusses Bennett’s characters’ performance of self, but also the way in which Bennett performs his own self. Bennett’s characters either perform to live up to a status that requires performance (King George III), or perform to give impression of a status that is not quite theirs (Miss Shepherd, the *Talking Heads* protagonists). In either case, there is a gap between what the character believes to be and believes s/he should be.

On a basic level, repeated behaviour, behaving ‘in line’ with the given context and with expectations, offers reassurance about the nature of relationships between people with a shared behavioural vocabulary. This is determined by shared linguistic and cultural understanding. If an individual repeatedly shows the same kind of behaviour, the piecing together of these behavioural signs will constitute something that is referred to as someone’s ‘personality’. It can be argued, however, that by conforming to expectations and repeatedly enforcing them through a particular kind of behaviour, a person encourages recipients to think he/ she is ‘being’ her/himself, when in fact s/he is ‘seeming’ him/herself. This can also be observed in everyday language. If there has been an unusual variation in someone’s behaviour, which is then ‘corrected’ through

reverting to usual behaviour, the reaction is often formulated as s/he ‘seems more like him/herself’.⁹

Bennett’s interest in exploring Goffman’s theses¹⁰ in practice is represented particularly well in *George III* and its filmic adaptation, *King George* (also pointed out by Games 2001:2). Commenting on the final scenes of the film, Bennett hopes they would have “rung a bell” with Goffman, “whose analysis of the presentation of self and its breakdown in the twentieth century seem just as appropriate to this deranged monarch from the eighteenth century.” (*WH*:391-392).

King George III can be aligned with the Cambridge Spies in that Bennett explores some complex issues around the notion of being and seeming through the monarch. The distinction between private and public persona is particularly poignant in Bennett’s depiction of the head of state in all his iconographic and symbolic power losing his ability to deliver the performance expected of him. Adopting Bennett’s simile of the mask bearing his own face (see above), the removal of the King’s behavioural mask equals insanity for those around him, as his demeanour no longer matches his function and his status. The ‘head’ of state is reduced to a gibbering wreck who cannot control his language, behaviour or bowels. There is a disjuncture in the “expected consistency between manner and appearance” (Goffman 1990:35). In *King George*, when the King seems totally unable to control his behaviour and is at the height of his crisis, a new doctor whose methods are non-traditional is brought to Windsor. Dr Willis’s approach to the King’s alarmingly unrestrained behaviour is that he must be artificially restrained until he remembers how to behave himself. The King is seized and strapped into a restraining chair, an episode that serves as a metaphor for the royal condition within constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy, showing the loss of regal power. The scene is reminiscent of a coronation, where the moment that symbolises ultimate power is perverted to a moment that signifies complete loss of free will and human dignity. Throne and crown are replaced by restraining chair and gagging device. As the

⁹ ‘It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role...It is in these roles that we know each other, it is in these roles that we know ourselves.’ (Park quoted in Goffman 1990:30)

¹⁰ See also Chapter 2.

mouthpiece of the restraining apparatus is fastened, a chorus simultaneously bursts out in fortissimo with the first line of the coronation anthem, “Zadok the Priest”.

When the King has recovered and is congratulated on being more himself, George III replies that he has always been himself, but has only now remembered how to *seem* himself. (*King George*:65). This remark shows the King’s realisation of his own royal behaviour as a performance, which is dominated by the necessity for self-restraint. Once the King has learned again how to ‘seem’, he no longer needs the restraining chair. This reveals the tension between the flawless picture of regal power the nation sees and the private agony of a man stripped of all control and dignity.

Bennett often portrays characters who display a discrepancy between the social status that is visible to the audience and the status they want to believe in, and of which they want to convince others. They are concerned with the creation and the keeping up of a “social front” (Goffman 1990:36). Many of Bennett’s middle-aged and elderly female protagonists fall into this category. They are constantly trying to convince themselves and others of their importance in relation to the world, and doing so in a mannered language that betrays pretence and snobbery. The origins of Bennett’s interest in this type of woman are outlined in the Introduction of this thesis. However, his Auntie Kathleen’s remark “That is the biggest gasworks in Britain. And I know the manager.” (*Tales*:75-76) can be seen as a defining statement to demonstrate the inference of status. Women such as Peggy (*A Woman of No Importance*) or Miss Fozzard (*Miss Fozzard Finds her Feet*) show their social aspirations by use of expressions like ‘frequenting a table’ or ‘as it transpired’. They think that through ‘speaking properly’ they can be identified as being part of the class they aspire to. The mask in these cases becomes that which the character wishes to be (other than expected to be, as shown in the case of King George III above). The mask of the self is at its most apparent in performances that are not quite perfect. King George’s breakdown becomes apparent when he no longer remembers ‘how to seem’, and Bennett’s pretentious middle-aged female characters are unmasked as performers when they are trying to *seem* sophisticated. Although not omniscient, Bennett’s audience is often ahead of the character they are watching, guided by clues in language and in behaviour.

...the reader is led into an 'identification in superiority'...With Goffman we become privileged observers in a special way: we see through trucks, acts, illusions of all sorts. With Goffman, the reader is no fool. The reader becomes an 'insider,' (Craib, quoted in Brissett & Edgley 1990:39)

This position of the privileged observer described above is very similar to the position of Bennett's audience. Bennett is a writer who empowers his reader through laying open his line of inquiry, just as Goffman makes his fieldwork findings available to the reader.

Bennett's heightened awareness of the way in which others perceive his behaviour results in the ability to repeat a 'performance' that is expected. In his documentary *Portrait or Bust*, produced in 1994, the same year as *King George*, Bennett comments on the construction of his persona, stating that "What they all say is be yourself. What they actually mean is imitate yourself." The Bennett persona satisfies both those who want to know what he is really like, and those who think they know exactly what he is like.

The documentary *Dinner at Noon*, produced in 1988, is based on fieldwork, utilising material gained from observing other people's behaviour in public places. It explores pretence, the social front and the importance of environment. *Dinner at Noon* was originally prepared with the intention of looking at the application of Goffman's theses in practice (*WH*:40). It features Bennett (as an on-screen narrator) observing other people in a public space, the Crown Hotel in Harrogate. Essentially, the documentary shows Bennett's working process, as he is known to gather his material and ideas from watching and listening to people and making notes of his findings. He functions as the eavesdropper, the commentator of other people's behaviour and as the narrator of his own past.

I have had unfortunate experiences in hotels. I was once invited to Claridge's by the late John Huston in order to discuss a script he had sent me. The screenplay was bulky (that was what he wanted to discuss) and looked like a small parcel. Seeing it and (I suppose) me, the commissionaire insisted I use the tradesman's entrance. (*Dinner at Noon*, in *WH*:39)

Dinner at Noon retains only a distant notion of its original concept of conducting fieldwork in the tradition of Goffman. Bennett and director Jonathan Stedall, faced with material that did not make obvious enough statements to suit behaviourist theses, panicked and reverted to the safe and familiar: Bennett's biography. The linking texts he provides shift the focus to his own behaviour in public places, and in hotels. The reference to Goffman is not very evident, as both audiences and critics can become blinded by the familiar feature of Bennett talking about his childhood and about being embarrassed. Of course this is in itself an examination of the presentation of self and behaviourist principles, but audience perception means that work like this will be received in terms of what it reveals about Bennett, not how it transfers to others. Bennett plans but then withdraws the transparency between being and seeming for his self in this documentary, using 'real' setting and commentary. The audience is made aware of the performative behaviour of the people observed in the hotel, but will probably not realise that Bennett is part of the performance. Goffman's theses fall victim to Bennett's indecisive approach. The narrative is linked with his life and behaviour, but he somehow excludes himself from the focus of the examination. It is he who puts on the performance, but the audience, preoccupied by the question of 'what he is really like', does not seem to realise that Bennett is performing Bennett.

Although behaviour as performance is largely concerned with conscious impression management, a performance can also be read into behaviour that is *seen* as performance. Recipients will either apply criteria which they have established for the reading of behaviour from their own vocabulary, or apply criteria that they have learned to use in connection with one particular person. Wherever possible, behaviour, unconscious as it may be, will be categorised as familiar.

In a sense, Goffman reaffirms [...] that "the imaginations which people have of one another are the solid facts of society" (Cooley 1902:87). So Goffman was about guises semblances, veneers, surfaces, illusion, images, shells, and acts. He was not, as most scholars pompously try to bill themselves, about substances, things, facts, truths, and depths. (Brissett & Edgley 1990:37)

As mentioned above, the Bennett persona, and many of Bennett's characters, are based on the principle of raising expectations and then not quite conforming to them. This

becomes most apparent when there is a flaw in a performance, and suddenly the front shows a crack.

He [Goffman] was sensitive to [...] performances going awry – accounts, apologies, and requests, “remedial interchanges”, and mistakes at work. In short, he was curious about all of those occasions in which human beings experience “close brushes with life”. (Brissett & Edgley 1990:38-39)

Bennett frequently offers insight into the process of a failed performance by referring to his own persona. As with his characters, it is always apparent what the author is trying to achieve with his performance, but the failure of Bennett’s impression-management is then dissected with a self-awareness that is sometimes almost painful to watch. It also provides comic effects through its strong sense of self-mockery. Bennett describes the following scene at the British Film Week in Los Angeles, where *A Private Function* premiered in 1985. The British Ambassador introduced the director, the producer and Bennett, who were all sitting in different parts of the cinema:

Mark is introduced first, the spotlight locates him, and there is scattered applause, then Malcolm similarly. When my turn comes I stand up, but since I am sitting further back than the others the spotlight doesn’t locate me. ‘What’s this guy playing at?’ says someone behind. ‘Sit down, you jerk.’ So I do. The film begins. (WH:193)

Such stories make the process of performing the self more transparent. An unsuccessful performance is easier to analyse, because a successful one will not be identified as a performance. Its performer’s intention is for it to seem real, and if it does so, its success is in its deception for reality. For the discourse on being and seeming, an imperfect performance is also more useful. Furthermore, it shows different ways of perception. Where an insecure character’s failure to perform convincingly may seem monstrously big to him/herself, it is either not properly noticed by surrounding ‘audience’ or interpreted as a different kind of performance. Bennett often manages to show both the way in which characters see themselves and how this differs in others’ perception. As with semiotic signifiers, there is no control over the reading of a sign.

An early scene from the television play *Me, I’m Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (see also Chapter 5) provides a useful example for one of these failed performances by a Bennett-

character, displaying behaviour that the audience would expect from the Bennett persona. The first scene is set in a doctor's surgery, as Hopkins waits for his appointment:

Narrator: (*Voice over*) Hopkins's problem was this: there were now so many empty seats that if he went on sitting there the girl would think he wanted to sit next to her. But if he sat somewhere else she would think he didn't. [...]

(Hopkins shuts his book. Gets up. Looks, rather stagily, at a magazine and sits down again one seat away from his previous seat, and so from the GINGER-HAIRED GIRL.)

Hopkins: Spread ourselves.

Ginger-haired girl: What?

Hopkins: No need to bunch up. Take your pick.

(He gets up again and sits somewhere else, even farther off. Spreads his arms across the adjacent chairs, expansively. Then he goes back to his book. Pause.)

Ginger-haired girl: I'm before you! (Writer:33)

Hopkins has an overwhelming desire to give a performance that gives the impression of confidence, normality and calm self-control. Through trying too hard, he overestimates his own self-importance when he attempts to behave 'normally'. This leads to a performance that is out of proportion for the occasion and the environment, and Hopkins does not manage to give the impression he intended. In the subtext for the scene, Hopkins worries whether the ginger-haired girl will think he is making advances if he sits next to her in an otherwise empty waiting room. It is, however, an environment where it is socially acceptable to sit next to strangers, and Hopkins's attempt to justify this will be met with incomprehension. Although the play is not written in the first person, we are acutely aware of what is intended by Hopkins' performative efforts. It is equally clear why the performance created does not leave the desired reading with the impressed character, the ginger-haired girl. The voice over (Bennett's own voice in the television play) functions as commentator of how these efforts are received, and reveal the gap between intention and reading of a performance. Bennett's authorial voice thus gives us insight into both sides of this behavioural act gone wrong. The strain of constant self-scrutiny and heightened self-awareness leads to behaviour that has exactly the opposite effect to the desired impression.

In everyday life things really are as they seem to be; but since “how they seem to be” is ever changing, Goffman’s “insistence on taking nothing at face value can... be said to be the most empirically relevant of his legacies” (Lofland 1984:22, in Brissett & Edgley 1990:37)

Obviously, both Goffman and Bennett assume a self behind the social front, and are not satisfied by seeing the performance without analysing what may lie underneath. Bennett frequently puts his audience in a position where it becomes necessary to reconsider face value. His work is often drawn from environments familiar to his audience, but then presented in a way that can at times be alienating and offer surprising conclusions. As Albert Hunt (in Brandt 1994) points out, this effect may be compared to Brecht’s ‘Verfremdungseffekt’ (alienation effect), where familiar phenomena are taken out of their context, forcing the audience to see them as though they were new.¹¹ Equally, Bennett’s work emphasises the need for acute observation and for re-examination of what is deemed to be predictable and well known. It challenges stereotype as it can build on preconceptions built on looks, context and environment, and then open up possibilities, which contradict these expectations. *The Old Country*, a play about a former spy, which, according to Bennett, is more about the notion of exile than it is about spying, is an example of this. The scene is set up to ‘seem’ as English as possible, with “a verandah overflowing with books, a middle-aged man dozing in a rocking chair, an Elgar record playing in the adjoining room” (quoted in Eyre 2000:328). Only half way into the first act do we learn that the play is set in Hilary’s Russian exile, and that the seemingly English character of the scene is carefully constructed, preserving an Englishness that is long gone (see also Scarr 1996:315-17). Often, people and settings are not what they seem in Bennett’s works: the friendly park keeper is a paedophile, the method actress works as an extra in soft porn films, and the sweet, slightly confused nonagenarian talks about her regrets at not having sex with her boyfriend before he was killed in World War I.

¹¹ Closely observe the behaviour of these people
Consider it strange, although familiar,
Hard to explain, although the custom.
Hard to accept, though no exception
Even the slightest action, apparently simple
Observe with mistrust. Check whether it is needed
Especially if usual
(Bertolt Brecht, *The Exception and the Rule*, quoted in Willett 1977:79)

7.3) Bennett performing Bennett

Playwriting in itself is not a very performative profession, and therefore, Bennett's aim to seem like himself includes the need to seem like a playwright.

And so individuals often find themselves with the dilemma of expression versus action. Those who have the time and talent to perform a task well may not, because of this, have the time or talent to make it apparent that they are performing well. (Goffman 1990:40)

It is part of the Bennett persona performance to deny that he is a proper author, to express constant surprise that anyone is interested in him personally, and to discourage academic or journalistic investigations. When the West Yorkshire Playhouse produced *The Lady in the Van* in May 2002, a surrounding programme of events, comprising an anthology of readings from other Bennett works, was planned. Bennett was initially very reluctant to allow this, stating that he could not understand how anyone would be interested in material about him. He gave his permission on the condition that he should determine what was read.¹² Ironically, the author who says he does not understand his appeal has, apart from putting himself on stage twofold in *Van*, produced and performed ten intensely personal monologues, *Tales*, on every detail of this 'uninteresting' life.

There is a difference between the presentation of self in interpersonal encounters and the presentation of self on the page. Behaviour happens to convey an impression to a counterpart who is present, and the performance will depend on the recipient's immediate reception of it. The writer, on the other hand, although also presenting the self, is assuming a reader, but the recipient's reaction is not part of the performance during its creation. The action of constructing an 'implied author' (see also Chapter 8) therefore works both ways, as the author also produces work with an 'implied reader' in mind. Both processes underline the mechanism of behaviour as performance, in live encounters or on the page. As with established behavioural patterns in the reading of others, the reading of 'written' behaviour will also apply established patterns wherever possible. If we transfer this concept from behaviour to writing as a different mode of behaviour, the author's wish to be perceived (and the vocabulary that is built up by the

¹² Source: Alex Chisholm, Literary Manager, West Yorkshire Playhouse.

recipient in reading) in a certain way drives the creation of an authorial persona, and thus manifests the difference between person and persona.

This section has argued that the Bennett persona is a phenomenon that exists within the tension of seeming and being himself. In a society where biography is “all-important, culturally central” (Schläger in Batchelor 1995:57), Alan Bennett is conceived as a celebrity who is subject to public curiosity and to the ubiquitous question of ‘what he is really like’. His persona encourages identification, inviting connections between his perceived self and his characters, and with the life of the reader.

According to Lejeune, the author of an autobiography implicitly declares that he is the person he says he is and that the author and the protagonist are the same. (Lejeune 1982:202, quoted in Anderson 2001:3)

This almost implies an autobiographical ‘contract’ between reader and author. In the eyes of the reader, the author gives access to his/ her life through autobiographical writing. The reader of a life feels a sense of ownership, which results in the expectation of access to the author’s life in other ways. Bennett is aware of this interrelation between the subject and the reader of biography, as shown in his play *Kafka’s Dick*, which is discussed in Chapter 5. Fame is therefore seen as coming with an obligation to engage with the audience, and this is expected of Bennett’s unthreatening and familiar persona. His image, however, is given interesting tension by what is seen as idiosyncrasies. His persona invites personalised responses and declarations of things in common with his readers, yet Bennett is deeply uncomfortable with this kind of attention and has never been a celebrity who can ‘work the crowds’. His tactic has been not to respond to this ongoing demand for biographical revelation, not normally granting requests for interviews, comments or features on himself. He puts information to the readers when he himself chooses to do so, within the boundaries of his own work. The readers are aware of the element of autobiography in Bennett’s works and read them as ‘the next best thing’ in search for further clues to the Bennett enigma. As the information given on the Bennett persona is selective and sometimes limited, this can make for an element of mystery, thus prompting readers to want to find out more about it. Paradoxically, therefore, the fact that readers have more interest in his life than in his work has made Bennett one of the best-selling playwrights in Britain.

This section has been concerned with the exploration of the Bennett persona and related characters in the light of Goffman's theory of behaviour by inference. While Bennett stresses the differences between these characters and himself earlier in his career, it seems as though he has accepted the links the audience makes between his public image and his works. He has learned to exploit public image to shield him from what he sees as invasions into his privacy. Bennett performing Bennett can therefore be seen as a means to an end. Goffman (1990:28) examines the assumption that a performance requires sincerity by its performer. At one extreme, the performer and the audience alike are 'fully taken in' by the act. At the other extreme, the performer will have no belief in his actions, and will not be concerned about whether the audience is convinced by it. Goffman calls the former a 'sincere' performance, the latter, unconvinced one 'cynical', although the cynic may gain pleasure from the masquerade. As so often, Bennett's role is evasive; his persona gravitates between sincerity and cynicism, according to the time in his career and the medium in which the persona is placed. Goffman (1990:29) also draws attention to the role of the audience in the creation of cynical performers whose audiences will not allow them to be sincere. He describes the movement from sincere to cynical performer (Goffman 1990:31) as a cyclical process, which can lead to performers, especially those held in high esteem, using cynicism as a means of "insulating their inner selves from contact with the audience" (31). Bennett sees his persona as something that influences the way others see him. It can thus be a matter of decision for him to which category to belong (stage or television playwright), which environment to conform to (north or south) and which idiom to adopt as a manner of speaking - Leeds, Oxford or London. The reader gradually becomes aware of Bennett's deliberation to have a foot in each camp, to choose from modes and registers at his disposal, and to distance himself in order to observe the way others present themselves. The perfecting of the different personae has the effect, however, that Bennett states never feels he belongs anywhere, because he has not fully committed to any of his possible environments with their regional and linguistic specificities.

Bennett is an unlikely example of the post-modern thesis of the image's dominance over the concept it represents: he shows a playfully self-conscious approach to the concept of

his self within a cultural climate that capitalises on inventions and reinventions of the self. He comments ironically (a distancing device!):

You would like to think you belong somewhere distinctive, whether it is a place or a class, but you know you are kidding yourself. However, I see that opens up another vast area of humbug and self-indulgence, namely, the writer as rootless man, so I think I had better stop and go home – wherever that is. (*WH*:593)

8) Masks and Doubles

The assumption of one single subject is perhaps unnecessary; perhaps it is just as permissible to assume a multiplicity of subjects, whose interaction and struggle is the basis of our thought and our consciousness in general? (Nietzsche, quoted in Freeman 1993:69)

Bennett's play *The Lady in the Van* (*Van*) premiered in the West End in 1999, starring Maggie Smith, and featuring a van that drove on stage, and was lifted by cranes. The journalistic reaction was dominated by these two facts, resulting in headlines in the style of "This van is just a vehicle for Dame Maggie" (De Jongh 1999). It was also mentioned that there were two characters called 'Alan Bennett'. When one of the Bennett-actors, Nicholas Farrell, had to cancel one of the previews because he wanted to attend the birth of his baby, Alan Bennett himself stepped in, playing 'Alan Bennett' with script in hand. The fact that the author was playing the author produced some reaction in the press, but to those critics familiar with Bennett's works and his history of playing characters that are himself in disguise, it would not have seemed surprising. The character of 'Alan Bennett' joins all the versions of the Bennett persona, Denis Midgley, Trevor Hopkins, Graham Whitaker, with the difference that for the first time, Bennett was playing an undisguised version of himself in *Van*. Through an examination of narratological aspects and trajectories in Bennett's works, this chapter discusses the development that leads to the unmasking of the writer in disguise. This has to be read in parallel with developments established in previous sections: for example, the generic evolutions in different media (Chapter 4) and Bennett's growing focus on autobiography (Chapters 5 and 6); developments which are relevant when looking at Bennett's changing perspective on the narrator. *Van*, the culmination of this development, suggests that Bennett has moved away from clear boundaries between truth and fiction, his own life and his life as shown in his works.

8.1) Narratological Approaches to Bennett's Plays

The following examples are presented in loose chronology for the purpose of establishing the growing complexity of the narratological constructions in Bennett's work.

Bennett's earlier, more naturalistic works often give the semblance of being 'story' rather than plot-dominated,¹ often mimetic² and chronological in nature. *Sunset Across the Bay* (1975), for example, imitates real life, and also seems to occur in real time in its deliberately slow pace. Events follow on from each other: Dad retires, he and Mam move to Morecambe, they find it difficult to overcome their isolation, they enjoy a visit from their son, Dad dies suddenly, Mam's future is left open. But beyond the chronology of the story, the plot weaves causalities about the lifelong wish to escape, but being disappointed by the reality when this change does occur. It shows the difficulties of an old couple in adjusting to new surroundings and the effect of spending all their time together post retirement. It also emphasises the recurring theme of the redundancy of an out-of-date generation. The story has an open ending, in that Mam is not filmed in an entirely grief-stricken way, but is shown purposefully striding along the seashore, prompting the question of whether Dad's death will mean isolation or liberation. Indeed, open endings occur with more frequency in the early Bennett plays than in the 1980s or 1990s. Suggestive clues are given as to a likely ending, but these often rest on assumption rather than on verbal proof. For example, the song 'I'm in Love With a Wonderful Guy' in the play *Virginia Woolf* can be seen as an implication of a possible homosexual relationship, but this meaning is not fixed.

¹ The story is the actual sequence of events as they happen, whereas the 'plot' is those events as they are edited, ordered, packaged and presented in what we recognise as a narrative [a version of the story, not to be taken literally] [...] story is determined by chronology and plot is determined by consequence or causality (McQuillan 2002:325)

² The parts of a narrative which are presented in a mimetic manner are 'dramatised', which is to say they are represented in a 'scenic' way, with a specified setting, and making use of dialogue which contains direct speech. 'Mimesis' is 'slow telling', in which is done and said is 'staged' for the reader, creating the illusion that we are 'seeing' and 'hearing' things for ourselves. By contrast, 'diegesis' means 'telling' or 'relating'. The parts of narrative which are presented in this way are given in a more 'rapid' or 'panoramic' or 'summarising' way [...] In practice, of course, writers use the two modes in a tandem, moving from mimetic to diegetic, and back again, for strategic reasons. (Summary of Genette in Barry 2002:233)

There are very few extradiegetic³ interventions in Bennett's earlier television drama, although there are notions of authorial intent, or an implied author. This element gathers strength in works from the late 1970s onwards, in works such as the season⁴ *The Writer in Disguise*. Briefly, McQuillan (2000:320) defines the implied author as "The author's mask or persona as reconstructed from the text", and the implied reader as "the audience presupposed by a text or the persona of a reader imposed by the norms and values of a narrative".⁵ Bennett's public persona has a strong effect on the perception of his works. We thus have to distinguish between two kinds of authorial influence on a text. Firstly, the audience's extra-textual knowledge about Bennett, his life and his persona will influence the understanding of a text. Secondly, Bennett's steering authorial presence in the text will also suggest the way in which he wishes his texts to be read.

Although the two are, of course, closely linked, the first is the more dominant presence, due to Bennett's celebrity status. Bennett's increasing presence as part of popular culture means that the concept of the implied author can easily be applied in the interpretation of his works. How do the audience's biographical awareness and the presence of an implied author interact in the reception of Bennett's plays? When the six plays later to be called *The Writer in Disguise* were screened in 1978 and 1979, Bennett was already a recognisable 'brand'. Each of the plays was headed by a caricature of Bennett, drawn by an invisible

³ Diegesis

(1) The space (or fictional world) in which narrated events occur.

(2) (2) Telling, recounting or narrating as opposed to showing or enacting as in drama. (McQuillan 2000:317)

A simple example for an extradiegetic device is music in film, heard to communicate a certain atmosphere to the audience, but not audible to the characters inside the narrative. If a character is placed outside the 'world' set up by the author, s/he exists in an extradiegetic realm, often with the function of connecting the outside worlds and the world of the play or the novel.

⁴ See 4.2 for a definition of 'season' within the field of television drama.

⁵ Onegas and Landa explain in more detail the relationship between what they call the 'textual' author and the 'textual' reader:

The textual author is a virtual image of the author's attitudes, as presented by the text. The textual reader is a virtual receiver created by the author in full view of the actual audience he or she presumes for his or her work. The textual reader need not coincide with the author's conception of the audience: this reader-figure may be a rhetorical strategy, a role which the author wishes the audience to assume (or even to reject). Likewise, the reader's textual author and the author's textual author need not coincide any more than the meaning of the work for author and reader. But if communication is to occur, these figures must have elements in common. (Onegas & Landa 1996:9)

hand. Just as the animated sketches of Bennett in the *Talking Heads* series of 1988 and 1998 make use of his public image/ persona, this caricature set a certain mode of expectation to do with a befuddled, but funny Bennett, shy, but sincere, dressed in tweed jacket with elbow patches and corduroy trousers. The way Bennett is presented is connected to the audience's expectations of his works: non-experimental, safe, mildly eccentric, but ultimately reactionary. When one play from the season *Writer, The Old Crowd* (Lindsay Anderson, 1978), did not match these expectations, there was a savage critical and public reaction, leading to the conclusion that Bennett's talent (or his familiarity?) had been corrupted by the polemic and provocative Anderson. Without the hindrance of the implied author, the play, although flawed, might have been feted as a brave experiment and innovative non-naturalistic piece of television drama.

A narrator, diegetic or extradiegetic, hetero- or homodiegetic,⁶ is often assumed to be the voice of the author when hypotheses about the autobiographical content of a text are made by the recipient or encouraged by critics or the author him/herself. The implied author, although not a presence in the text, is often also seen simply as the voice of the author. The linked concepts of the implied author and the implied reader have been given a lot of attention within the discipline of narratology. McQuillan (2000:320) states that the implied author can easily be distinguished from the narrator in homodiegetic narratives as, for example, novels like *Jane Eyre* or *Great Expectations*, where the story is told by a first person narrator. There is, however, always a danger of confusing the narrator with the implied author, as the narrator is constructed to be the steering voice of the narrative and the background presence of yet another authorial intention may prove confusing. Equally, the narratee and the implied reader are not identical, but might also be difficult to distinguish at times. The implied reader and the implied author form a partnership, as do the 'explicit' narrator and the narratee. There may be a case for linking the 'explicit'

⁶ Momentarily disregarding genre (i.e. the fundamental distinction between prose and dramatic text), we distinguish between the heterodiegetic narrator, who is not a character in the story narrated, but leads through somebody else's story. A homodiegetic narrator is not only part the story s/he tells as a character in, but tells her/his own story, predominantly in the first person. While first person narrators may be hetero- or homodiegetic, omniscient narrators are necessarily heterodiegetic, as homodiegetic narrators are part of their own story as it is happening. (see also Barry 2002:234)

narrator with 'story', and the implied author with 'plot'. The narrator, although extradiegetic at times, is subject to events, and moves with them, whereas the implied author has a more dramaturgical role, supplying pointers of how events should be read and how events arising from them should be anticipated. But, again, an omniscient extradiegetic narrator may blur those borderlines. Bennett increasingly disregards boundaries between narrator and authorial voice within his works.

As the authorial intentions read from the text are as much a construction as the text itself, there is normally no evidence that the implied author is representing the writer's 'true' voice. Examining the text as a construct helps to clarify the distinction between the author as the producer of a text, and the way s/he would like to be seen by its recipient. New Critical readings provide distinctions between author and dramatic speaker, between real reader and 'mock reader', emphasising the connection between speaker and mock-reader (see Gibson in Onegas & Landa, 1996:155). The mock-reader is defined as "the narrator's addressee, a fictional figure whose knowledge, taste and personality may differ from those of the real reader". The concept of an implied or textual author is controversial.⁷ Theorists such as Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1968) have tried to reconcile the notion of an implied author within a text with the taboo of committing intentional, affective or didactic fallacies (see Kindt and Mueller 1999:n.pag.).

A generation had come to accept without thinking that a true 'poem' (including fiction) should not mean but be. With the author ruled out under the 'intentional fallacy' and the audience ruled out under the 'affective fallacy', with the world of ideas and beliefs ruled out under the 'didactic heresy' and with narrative interest ruled out under the 'heresy of plot' some doctrines of autonomy had become so desiccated that only verbal and symbolic interrelationships remained. (Booth 1996 cited in Kindt/ Mueller 1999:n.pag.)⁸

For critics such as Genette and Baal (both cited in Kindt and Mueller 2003:n.pag.), the concept of an implied author is problematic. Firstly, an 'implication' carries suggestions of

⁷ See Kindt and Mueller's paper for a summary of the debate.

⁸ Wayne C. Booth: *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and the Poetics of Fictions [orig. publ. 1968]. In: Spilka 1977:77-89.

existing through interpretation, which goes beyond the boundaries of the discipline Narratology.⁹ Secondly, in works that have an explicit narrator, the distinction between this narrative voice and the implied author can be very difficult to make. In practice, borderlines are blurred despite clear definitional distinctions.

The notions of subtext¹⁰ and implied authorship can also overlap in certain ways. It is suggested here that the way through the text is not obviously suggested by subtext, whereas once one notices an implied author's presence, one is likely to follow the 'suggestions'. A subtext thus remains less prescriptive than implied authorship, and seems to leave both the recipient and the author him/ herself with more alternatives of interpretation. In the theatre, subtext is also strongly influenced by directorial decision.

The notion of subtext is not dependent on the author being privy to it, as Bennett points out in the introduction to *Talking Heads II* (120-121): he uses the metaphor of going through customs with a suitcase full of dirty underwear and embarrassing photographs, unaware of having packed them into the case (see also Chapter 6). Similarly, in constructing a text, Bennett points out that an author can never be conscious of all the ingredients of a text and their effects on the reader. Bennett presents the suitcase-example at a time when his texts already provide us with a 'preferred' reading, a path constructed by clearly 'decodable' authorial intentions. This may leave the reader doubtful over Bennett's claim that a writer is unaware of all the embarrassing things in his metaphorical suitcase, which seem so obvious to his audience, as clues are suggested in the narrative.

⁹ "[N]arratology has no need to go beyond the narrative situation, and the two agents 'implied author' and 'implied reader' are clearly situated in that beyond". (Genette: *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (n. 27), p. 137.) Although the advocates of a descriptive narratology do not wish to dispense with the notion of the "implied author", they suggest giving it a name that accords more closely with its theoretical status: Mieke Bal, for example, suggests quite simply that it would be better "to speak of the interpretation, or the overall meaning of the text". (Kindt & Mueller: n. pag)

¹⁰ Maintext: things that are directly expressed; Subtext: things that are implied, normally non-verbal acts of communication. Main- and subtext interrelate in that maintext creates the subtext and subtext delivers possible underlying meanings for the maintext. 'Story' can thus be linked with 'maintext', whereas plot, the distinction between possibilities or hints that things might happen and them actually happening, can be aligned with 'subtext'. It is assumed here that subtext be extra- and intratextual, i.e. the knowledge by which the audience identifies subtext, thus expanding possibilities of meaning, can be taken from both the worlds of the text and from knowledge the audience brings with them.

A fixed meaning is by no means a given with contemporary playwrights: Harold Pinter is an obvious example.¹¹ His plays demonstrate the absence of authorial authority or presence in the text – instead of an ‘implied author’, we have a ‘deliberately absent author’. In contrast, Bennett’s presence and his intent can normally be detected in his works.

Bennett’s play *Kafka’s Dick* (see Chapter 5) is heavy with biographical ‘facts’ about Kafka, and, for those recipients who know enough about Bennett’s treatment of his own life, offers notions of implied authorship: the writer – Bennett – writing about another writer – Kafka. Bennett entwines his own issues with fame and audience expectation with those of his protagonist. In the excerpt below, the dying Kafka has asked his friend Max Brod to burn his works after his death, but is on the verge of taking the decision back.

Brod [...] All will be taken care of.

Kafka: Good. Still, if in fact you can’t get hold of any of my stuff, no matter. Some of it has been published. It could be anywhere. (*Kafka*:7)

The focus on Kafka’s wish for the elimination of his works (and ultimately himself) might be read as Bennett’s discomfort at his stereotypical image and the set expectations of his audience. Kafka’s hesitation when his wish seems to be so easily granted can be interpreted as the conflict between the wish for anonymity and the wish for critical recognition and popular success. Furthermore, the scene carries the tension between Bennett’s refusal to say what his works ‘mean’, and the ongoing frustration at readers/ viewers not reading or understanding his work ‘correctly’. Bennett’s strong sense of ownership and the artist’s vanity are thus in conflict with each other. Kafka’s frustration at not being remembered, cited and at not being understood correctly (“it’s a beetle, not a cockroach!”) evokes an image of the author in two minds, seeking to control the meaning of his work, but also wanting it to be self-explanatory. Even so, *Kafka’s Dick* can be appreciated without

¹¹ Whereas the concept of implied authorship seems appropriate for the interpretation of many of Bennett’s works, Pinter could be categorised as an author who does not wish his authorial persona to become involved in what his text says to the viewer/ reader. Instead, Pinter offers rich possibilities of subtextual interpretation, but obscures his own intentions for the reading of the text. Authorial ‘pointers’ are hardly detectable in Pinter’s plays, and not likely to be supplied in forewords or explained in lectures or letters to readers (see Moss 2002:161).

knowledge of Bennett's life. The information about the author is subtextual, whereas in later works, in particular *Van*, this information is explicit.

The above concepts are constants in Bennett's work from an early stage, although they gather in importance and in degree. In his first play for television, *A Day Out* (Stephen Frears, 1972), it is noticeable that the subtextual threads are only brought together at the very end, when the narrative moves from 1911 to 1919, and we learn what has become of the characters then unaware of the impending catastrophe of World War I. The implied author has only a discreet presence. In a *Talking Heads* monologue, on the other hand, the silent voice and steering presence of the implied author has more authority than the audible voice of the protagonist. How can an implied text/ subtext thus have more reliability than the main text and its on-stage or on-screen narrator? The concept of the 'unreliable narrator' offers a solution in that it is defined as

- (1) A narrator whose trustworthiness is undermined by events as deduced from the narrative.
- (2) More technically, a narrator whose actions are not in accordance with the implied author's norms and values. (McQuillan 2000:329)¹²

As discussed in Chapter 7, Bennett's work reveals an ongoing tendency to revoke statements he has made about himself, to give a certain impression, and to then declare frustration about it. Bennett has always preferred ambiguity in his presentation of self, leaving it open the question which of his performances is 'his true self'. Given the obvious resemblance between the public Bennett persona and his variations of self in his texts, it is evident that this is a technique Bennett employs both in his media appearances, and in his plays and documentaries.

As an example of Bennett's juxtaposition of reliable and unreliable narrator, the play *Virginia Woolf* has an extradiegetic 'presence', which expresses itself as a voice over. This voice, supplied by Bennett himself, does not have a narrator's function primarily, but serves to supply what the protagonist never quite manages to say. The reader has the feeling that

the author has the real authority over the text, and that the voice over is the mouthpiece of this.

Ginger-haired Girl	[...] Newcastle. I've never fancied it somehow. Have you been?
Hopkins	Newcastle? No.
Narrator	(Voice over) This was a lie. Hopkins had been to Newcastle many times. So why did he not say so? This was what he had come to ask the doctor. (<i>Virginia Woolf</i> :34)

Although it provides the viewer with the whole picture by giving an insight into the protagonist's mind, the voice over also contributes to the deconstruction of Hopkins, by making clear the failure of his intended performances. This 'omniscient' position of the reliable voice increases its authority even more, although its contributions are sparse. This, then, could be defined as both the implied author's voice, as well as the reliable narrator of the play, in opposition to the protagonist's unreliability. In many of Bennett's works there is a detectable certainty about what constitutes the truth, even though his protagonists are not always the ones who express it. Bennett's extradiegetic voice over in *Virginia Woolf* has the function of telling the truth. The narratological characteristics of the *Talking Heads* monologue are different from other television plays.¹³ The only voice heard is that of the protagonist, and given this, reliability cannot be examined through a character's interaction with other characters. The obvious alternative to the character's account emerges from the implications between the lines, making 'the full picture' or 'the real story' clearly visible without it being verbalised. The 'type' of unreliable narrator is that which is described by McQuillan (2000:329) as self-revelatory, i.e. "A narrator whose trustworthiness is undermined by events as deduced from the narrative." *Talking Heads I* and *II* thus present the case of the unreliable character, invisibly 'subtitled' by an obvious alternative narrative. Although very different in structure and form, narratologically, there is a direct line of descent between the still-vocal reliable narrator's voice in *Virginia Woolf* and the silent but dominant presence in the monologues. One audible, one silent, they have

¹² McQuillan (2000:326) describes a reliable narrator as 'a narrator who provides an accurate account of narrated events. More technically, a narrator who behaves in accordance with the implied author's norms.'

¹³ *Talking Heads* and their positioning within the genre of monologue are discussed in Chapter 4.6.

a similar function of reminding the recipient of the unreliability of the story we are being told.

They don't quite know what they are saying and are telling a story to the meaning of which they are not entirely privy. (CTH, Introduction:32)

Some of the *Talking Heads* characters, however, give the impression of being 'privy' to their editing of their own narrative (see also Chapter 4.6). At first sight, it is not obvious how the dual narrative is managed within the monologues, in the absence of any other characters, and without an audible 'extra textual' narrator's voice. While the absence of a 'direct' authorial presence classifies the underlying truth as subtext, there is a more definite, uncompromising quality to what the implied reader is to believe. Bennett leaves little room for doubt over the 'right' kind of truth. A typical *Talking Heads* character is gradually established as unreliable, but this happens without any other verbal narrative commentary. It is the viewer who has to fill in 'reliable' narrative, although the path taken through the narrative is predetermined by the subtext and the implied author's clues.

Bennett's presence is coded, hidden or implied in his plays until the 'watershed' of *Van* in 1999. However, apart from being their author, he is also the narrator and commentator in his documentaries. He uses a mediated self, the Bennett persona.

Although Bennett's role as society's social conscience is an important part of his documentaries, his presenter's role as 'Alan Bennett' (befuddled but endearing academic type with northern roots) remains dominant. Such is the appeal of the 'brand' Bennett that he almost turns documentary-based programmes, scripted by authors other than himself, into Bennettian auteurist products. The ones he conceives, writes and presents, however, are entirely personality-centred in that they focus on Bennett's relationship with the topic of the documentary (see also Chapter 4.2).

Given that the theme of 'institutions' is so strong in Bennett's documentaries, it seems logical that he produces a series about his own childhood at the stage in his career when he

has become an institution himself. *Telling Tales* (1999), a series of autobiographical monologues, is difficult to assign to any one genre, and even any one of Bennett's own 'tailor-made' genres (see also Chapter 4.2 for a discussion on the series' form). *Tales* confirms Bennett's increasing departure from genre-boundaries; formally his work being on the edge of a genre, just as it often explores themes from a liminal position.

Tales is seen here as a fragmented documentary of very simple form. This formal sparseness shows Bennett's confidence in the monologues' content and style. The writing is honed to a minimalist perfection. *Tales'* simplicity is also an exercise in nostalgia, recalling the early age of television. It may also be reminiscent of stories told on the radio, recalling formats such as epilogue, fireside chat, book at bedtime, all formats which are associated with a personal relationship between narrator and listener. *Tales* also retains characteristics of the documentary. As Derek Paget suggests in his book on documentary drama, work in the documentary mode often exhibits a 'discourse of factuality'.

The function of this discourse is to verify (or to appear to verify) what we are seeing. The verifying discourse is almost always imported from non-dramatic modes of signification – like the news broadcast, the current affairs programme, and the documentary proper. It normally comprises such rhetorical strategies as voice-over, captions, charts and statistics, and direct ('talking head') address of the camera/ audience. All these things have been so naturalised in our culture that they are perceived as the mediation of 'straight facts'. (Paget 1990:4-5)

The title, '*Telling Tales*', suggests the relativity of 'truth', as 'telling tales' can mean 'telling lies'; it also carries notions of storytelling. As *Tales* shares its visual style with *Talking Heads*, and we have established that the real telling of tales (lies or self-deceptions) happens in the *Talking Heads*-monologues, one might even suggest a reversal of the titles.

In *Tales*, Bennett is a sincere, confessional narrator of his early life, sharing reminiscences, documenting his family life, a world that has disappeared, and, over all, creating a text with very detailed and fond memories of his parents. With the security of the remoteness of his memories, and his parents and family members 'safely' dead, Bennett in 2000 seems ready to be the teller of his own tale without hiding behind 'fictional' characters. Produced in 1999 and 2000, *Van* and *Tales* have the Bennett persona and autobiographical reflections at

their centre. Yet in narratological terms the two seem to sit uncomfortably together. Bennett's work of that period indicates that all narrative, especially that concerning the self, is unreliable. It therefore seems ironic that Bennett opts for such a 'straight' delivery and form in *Tales*: the writer without disguise.

Despite this generic variety, it is suggested here that *Tales* should be mainly seen as part of the evolution within Bennett's production of documentaries. If we look at *Tales* as part of Bennett's stage and television plays, it does not fit into the trajectory of claiming freedom through unreliability that *Van* seems to follow. If, however, we see it as in line with Bennett's development within the documentary genre, it seems a logical fusion of autobiography and history with emphasis on community, regional specificity and the responsibility of the individual and the community towards each other. The autobiographical monologues, although they complement the ongoing revelation of the Bennett persona, fuse styles such as that of diary and documentary, whereas *Van* is the culmination of an ongoing discussion and exploration of the self in a different mode, that of stage play. The journeys that Bennett seems to take in his exploration of the self, and in facilitating knowledge of issues important to him, can be seen as separate trajectories. In *Van*, roughly the same period as *Tales*, Bennett finds new forms to express the narrator's unreliability.

8.2) Case Study: *The Lady in the Van*

Van, a play blending concepts of celebrity, self-deprecation and exhibitionism, presents a formal innovation and autobiographical culmination in Bennett's works, but with reassuringly familiar ingredients. It is a full-length, two-act play, dramatising the real story of a bag lady, Miss Shepherd, who lived in Bennett's driveway for almost twenty years. Two characters called 'Alan Bennett' and 'Alan Bennett 2' guide the audience through the action. The playwright has dramatised himself and spread his stage-self over two characters. The content, the narrator's position and the way in which Bennett contextualises Miss Shepherd's life alongside his own are similar to the way the material appears in its

other formats (spoken and written diaries). However, while the *story* remains similar, the play is distinctive from its original form in terms of its narratological organisation.

There is [...] a profound change in narrative climate as one moves between the two territories [...] It stems from the altered relationship between the narrator and his protagonist when that protagonist is his own past self. The narration of inner events is far more strongly affected by this change of person than the narration of outer events; past thought must now be presented as remembered by the self, as well as expressed by the self (i.e. subject to what David Goldknopf calls the 'confessional increment'). (Dorrit Cohn in McQuillan 2000:254)

Although Bennett's main theme was his self long before he adapted his diaries into a stage play, *Van* marks Bennett's theatrical transition from third to first person narrative. Before *Van*, on stage, and in television plays, his life was always coded and in disguise. Neither has Bennett previously appeared to be very preoccupied with autobiography in his stage works. He explains this by stating that he feels less exposed to critic's expectations within the more popular medium of television (Anty 1984:13, see also Chapter 4). *Van* presents a significant change in Bennett's evolution of the narrator and his function. Before 1999, the narrator was an implied or an extradiegetic part of the plot. In *Van*, the narrator is both dual and deliberately unreliable, affecting both the reliability of storytelling, and also the way in which the narrators are perceived by other characters and by the audience. One of the two Bennetts in the play is a predominantly extradiegetic narrator (he is visible to the audience and the other Bennett only); the other more conventionally diegetic (he interacts with the other characters in the play). How can we interpret the fact that the development of Bennett's persona against the backdrop of the development of narratological aspects coincides with the increasing fragmentation of plots and the questioning of a single version of the truth?

Van is an autobiographical, seemingly factual text, equipped with a degree of 'unreliability'. The diagram introduced at the end of Chapter 6 indicates that the conflicting tendencies of self-revelation and secrecy in Bennett's works are reconciled by increasing exposure within the works, and decreasing it in private. This provides a context for understanding the increasing importance of unreliable narrative in Bennett's works. While

the text becomes more autobiographical and personal, the author renounces authenticity through adding signifiers of unreliability. *Van* thus shows Bennett confronting his own conflicting urges: to keep his life private on the one hand, but broadcasting its contents in his works on the other. In contrast to his previously authoritative presence as an implied narrator, *Van* sees the shift of the unreliable narrator to the Bennett persona (twofold in this case). This results in a highly complex narratological situation, which blurs borderlines between subtext, implied authorship and the authorial persona representing the author on stage.

After this account [the diary of Bennett's and Miss Shepherd's co-existence] had been published I had one or two stabs at turning it into a play but without success. Miss Shepherd's story was not difficult to tell; it was my own story over the same period that defeated me. Not that there was a good deal to be said, but somehow the two stories had to interconnect. It was only when I had the notion of splitting myself into two that the problem seemed to solve itself. (*Van*:xxii)

The material of *Van* has made a transition from its origins in Bennett's diaries, to being a separately edited diary, adapted for radio, and finally adapted for the stage. The text has developed from one 'factual' form to another through its different evolutionary stages. For the stage adaptation, different devices were found to replace the voice of the writer of the diary, but the often diary-like tone of the two Alan Bennett narrators preserves a sense of the diaries within the play. Yet the play is not just an animated diary. In its generic transition, its dramatisation, the authorial character(s) are also dramatised. Being in two minds is easier to demonstrate in prose, whereas on stage, narrative decisions have to be made. The authorial presence acquires more dimensions (visual, aural) and literally moves centre-stage. Another distinction has to be made between play and diaries. Analysis and comment on events and the events themselves are easily integrated in diaries, but it is difficult for characters to say what they know or are in plays, even though the audience needs to be furnished with a certain amount of knowledge in order to understand both story and plot.¹⁴ Bennett's device of doubling himself up enables the two Bennetts to say things about themselves which would not have a place if the play was strictly naturalistic. As it is,

¹⁴ Bennett also discusses this dilemma of the playwright in the introduction to the stage play *George III*:xiii.

Van is naturalistic in language and 'life-likeness', but not in structure. The solution Bennett has found for *Van* ensures that he can talk about himself, but still produce a functional piece of theatre. The play is an example of how the same story can find completely different modes of expression. As Onega and Landa (1986:8) argue:

A text is a linguistic construct, while a story is a cognitive scheme of events. The same story can give rise to a number of texts: for instance, when Kafka wrote *The Castle* in the first person and then rewrote it in the third person, the story remained essentially the same, but the text became a different one. [...] Telling a story from a from a single character's point of view is one of many possible modalizations of the action.

The play text *Van* is one of these 'many possible modalizations' of the story of Bennett's life alongside Miss Shepherd's life. The chronicling by the narrators is similar to Bennett's diary version and can be associated with 'real' life, whereas the two narrators of this 'real' story made out of the same author are a non-naturalistic device. The theatricalisation of Alan Bennett's conflict of being in two minds casts him in roles that were not present or not as prominent in previous incarnations of the text. In the stage play, his two personae are moderators rather than just observers, editors rather than just narrators, protagonists rather than just participators. Consequently, the emphasis of the narrative changes. In the diary and the radio versions of *Van*, Miss Shepherd was the subject, and Bennett the observing narrator. In the stage version, he becomes both narrator and narratee, both the subject and the object of the play.

Van displays and negotiates Bennett's narrative editing of his life, performed by the figures of Alan Bennett and Alan Bennett 2. Can they be described as alter egos? As expressions of a writer's split self? As personifications of Bennett's inability to make up his mind? It is suggested that in *Van*, Bennett recognises the permanent state of an author's 'schizophrenia' and dramatises the internal discourse between the two conflicting voices.

The device of having two actors playing me isn't just a bit of theatrical showing off and does, however crudely, correspond to the reality. [...] (*Van*:xxii)

The high degree of playful self-referentiality in *Van* suggests a post-modern 'stylisation' of the ultimate absence of reliable 'truth'. Is *Van* therefore a post-narratological approach by an unlikely author or just another way of Bennett 'safely' talking about himself, claiming that potential truths are simply possibilities? In the play, there *is* no notion by which the audience can uncover the truth through clues, as is the case in *Talking Heads*. Bennett puts his own persona on a par with his characters whose stories cannot be trusted. Throughout the play, one is regularly reminded of the writer's agenda, where 'what works' dramaturgically must often take precedence over 'what happened' in reality. Despite his claims to the contrary, Bennett is not immune to contemporary artistic trends. In *Van*, he dramatises the process of authorship: the play's text, but also the conditions under which this text is produced.

- A. Bennett: Putting her [his mother] in a home seems like some kind of failure.
 A. Bennett 2: And giving this one a home?
 A. Bennett: That seems a failure too.
 A. Bennett 2: Actually, that's quite neat. I like that.
 A. Bennett: (*amiably*) Oh, piss off. (*Van:48*)

In its narratological structure, *Van* is roughly based on the chronology in which events happened in Bennett's life, although the play takes anachronological¹⁵ liberties, occasionally jumping forwards and backwards in time. The play has a frame narrative almost exclusively inhabited by the two Alan Bennetts. The parts of the action including other characters is often introduced, interrupted and concluded by them as well. The two Bennett's are compères of the action, but also participate.

There is no satisfactory way of dubbing these two parts (I would not call them halves) of my personality, and even if 'the writer' would do for one, what is the other? The person? The householder? Or (a phrase from the courts) 'the responsible adult'? (*Van:xxii-xxiii*)

Bennett dramatises roles from which states of mind can be deducted. Although he denies that there is a clear-cut division between the two Alan Bennetts, the demeanour of the characters and indeed Bennett's remark in the introduction hint at the opposite. The

character of ‘Alan Bennett 2’ takes part in the action and interacts with other characters. He is the “one bit of me (often irritated and resentful) that had to deal with this unwelcome guest camped literally on my doorstep” (*Van*:xii). This aspect of Bennett resentfully deals with “attributions of goodness” for putting up with Miss Shepherd, although Bennett himself comments he would have preferred “to be thought of as a fool”, as “kind is so tame!” (*Van*:xxiii). This insistence on rejecting the attribution of niceness has been noted by Stephen Frears:

Someone once offered a contract to Alan to deliver a script and he had some idea to write a pornographic play. There were a lot of old ladies being very, very foul-mouthed. This was a way to get out of his contract because he would deliver a play that was undoable. It always depressed him that the old ladies liked him so much – that they thought he was such a good boy, and he longed to misbehave.¹⁶

The other part of the twofold author-figure, ‘Alan Bennett’, represents the author’s longing for ruthlessness and misbehaviour, and the desire to challenge his received persona. Indeed, ‘Alan Bennett’, as opposed to ‘Alan Bennett 2’ gives the impression that this is the more ‘real’ or ‘private’ incarnation of the playwright, the one who does not have to compromise to meet the demands of the outside world. ‘Alan Bennett 2’ is more reminiscent of the familiar public persona. The fact that the name is the same as that of its creator, whereas the other one, ‘2’, is second in order or in rank, or a copy, signals the hierarchical superiority of the Bennett longing to misbehave. The character ‘Alan Bennett’ demonstrates that Bennett on the one hand sees the writer as doing ‘the devil’s work’, but, although conscious of the implications, does not shy away from the amorality of exploiting people’s lives in his works:

A Bennett	She’s either dead or she’s in a coma. <i>He pushes Alan Bennett</i>
A Bennett 2	Give over. This could be really sad.
A Bennett	I know. I can’t wait. (<i>Van</i> :60)

¹⁵ A discontinuity between the order in which they are (re)told in a narrative. (McQuillan 2000:314).

¹⁶ Interview with Stephen Frears, London, 31 Dec. 2002.

In contrast to Bennett ‘the cuddly playwright’, this introduces the audience to a more scheming and ruthless Bennett.

The two Bennett characters cannot be thought of as opposites, but could be interpreted as aspects of Bennett’s self that have contradicting views. Since, however, they are two parts of the same person, compromises have to be found to solve these conflicts.

As I wrote them first, they were like an old married couple, complaining and finding fault with each other, nothing one thought or said a surprise to the other. I then started to find more fun in their relationship, made it teasing and even flirtatious [...] (*Van*:xxiii)

The following exchange demonstrates this:

A Bennett	Do you want to go to bed?
A Bennett 2	Why not? You know this is only a metaphor?
A Bennett	That’s what they all say. (<i>Van</i> :60)

Until the end of the play, the character of Alan Bennett is invisible to other characters and only communicates with Alan Bennett 2 (*Van*:3). As a mainly extradiegetic narrator, he sits on the fence – homodiegetic in principle, but excluding himself from the narrative until the end. This draws natural parallels with the way Bennett describes his own position as a writer who does not participate in life, as the observer and documenter of others.

Narratologists distinguish between ‘hetero’ and ‘homodiegetic’ narrators, but *Van* offers an interesting case which cannot be consigned fully to either of these categories. A homodiegetic narrator tells and participates in his own story. ‘Heterodiegetic’, on the other hand, means that the narrator is not part of the actual story. But in the case of *Van*, the two Bennett characters tell their own story, but with the knowledge of its resolution. They participate in it, but also tell it retrospectively and can consequently be omniscient. If the Bennetts in *Van* change between the hetero- and homodiegetic perspective, the former excludes the fact that they are telling ‘their’ own story, even when they are seen as extradiegetic commentators. The latter takes account of the personal story only and

excludes his omniscient and retrospective view of events. *Van* comes closest to being an autodiegetic narrative:

A first person narrative the narrator of which is also the protagonist or the hero; a variety of homodiegetic narrative such that the narrator is also the main character (*Great Expectations* etc) (Prince 1988:9)

Prince distinguishes between 'erlebendes' (encountering) and 'erzaehlendes' (narrating) 'I' (see Prince 1988:27); two modes that are not often found in the same text.¹⁷ Bennett in *Van* is both 'erlebend' and 'erzaehlend', but the two functions cannot tidily be associated with the two stage personifications of the author.

The two Bennetts' complex relationship on stage is mirrored by their complex narratological functions, which vary throughout the play. One of the Bennetts' functions is to provide a transition from narration to action - a 'classic' dramaturgical role of the on-stage narrator, leading into the action from the frame narrative, and back again, and, in this case, constantly transgressing the boundaries between the two. As well as being autodiegetic narrators, the two Alan Bennetts inhabit both the frame and the 'central' narrative, which are not separated very strictly and often merge into each other. The audience is often addressed directly when Alan Bennett 2 is providing these pieces of linking information, which can provide a shortcut into a scene.

A Bennett 2: [...] Meanwhile I seem to be buying a house
Rufus: It's a pretty house, smaller than ours, of course, but you're unattached. (*Van*:8-9)

While this is not unusual for a play with a narrator, the function becomes more complex when two narrators share it. Alan Bennett interacts with people in the main narrative (Miss Shepherd, neighbours, social workers) and is also the provider of links, context and necessary information for the audience. True to his character, which wants to please more

¹⁷ Roquentin in Sartre's *Nausea* serves as an example: he is an 'encountering I' insofar as he longs to see Anny again and a 'narrating I' insofar as he recounts the longing in his diary. Similarly, in Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Pip is an 'erzaehlendes Ich' insofar as he recounts his adventures and an 'erlebendes Ich' insofar as he lives them.

than the slightly ruthless Alan Bennett, Alan Bennett 2 is the mediator, who makes sure that everyone's perspective is taken into consideration. He cares much more what other people think than his other half. This applies to the diegetic characters in the play, but is also directed at the extradiegetic presence of the audience, as his frequent breaking of the fourth wall documents. The character of Alan Bennett 2 has the function to relativise, deconstruct and question his alter ego's statements. He also represents the author's long-standing preoccupation with self-consciousness, commenting on his and the other character, Alan Bennett's, actions and their consequences throughout the play.

The two Bennetts co-ordinate the time scheme of events:

A Bennett 2 Cut to five years earlier. I am standing by the hospital in Camden Town... (*Van*:7)

The above quotation shows how Bennett blends techniques of diary writing, stage conventions, and even uses filmic vocabulary ('cut') to suggest a seamless transition to a new scene within an entirely different time frame. Interestingly, Bennett has often presented himself as being a writer of limited scenographic imagination (see also Wu 2000:81). The security of the established working relationship Bennett enjoys with the director of the first production of *Van*, Nicholas Hytner, is likely to have made him confident that solutions would be found for transitions between scenes. It is, however, noticeable, that Bennett's touch has become lighter, and he has freed himself from naturalistic restrictions, something he also found liberating in the work on *The Old Crowd* with Lindsay Anderson (see also *Writer*, introduction). The ease with which the play is moved forward by the two Bennetts demonstrates this development, as does the casual narrating of events that are not acted out. This has dramaturgical reasons, just as the eventual structure of the play was adapted from three to two acts. True to their double-function within narrative and frame narrative, the Bennetts introduce scenes, or describe them as action takes place

A Bennett 2 Gradually Miss Shepherd evacuates her belongings from the old van until, an empty windowless shell, the council tows it away. And on that same morning, invested by her anonymous donor, Lady Wiggin,

with the keys and logbook of her new and as yet unpainted vehicle and once again employing her full repertoire of hand signals, Miss Shepherd drives into the garden. (*Van*:30)

The two Bennetts also function to show the artificiality of the narrative (metanarrative).

Three different levels, or frames, of the narrative can be identified:

The first level contains Miss Shepherd and the two Bennetts, representing the twenty years of their living next to each other. The second details the relationship between Bennett's two 'contrasting selves', flitting between the time of the audience, the time of the Miss Shepherd-narrative and various times in Bennett's life. The third level is superimposed on the play through the extratextual knowledge the audience has of Bennett, as a manipulator of his constructed selves and narratives. This narratological frame is accessed by the two Bennetts, but is different in nature from the other two, as it is 'implied' rather than explicit.

Bennett invites the audience to be constantly aware of the interaction of these three strands that determine both action and interpretation of action. The author remains in control of the audience's linking of the different narratives as well as the overriding 'frame' of his own life.

Miss Shepherd	Mr Bennett.
A Bennett	What?
Miss Shepherd	Will you do it [push her in wheelchair] again?
A Bennett	It's supposed to be half past eleven at night,
A Bennett 2	So what? It makes a nice ending to the scene. (<i>Van</i> :63)

Constant references to the artificiality of a text are common within post-modern drama and programme making. In the above example, Bennett uses the relationship of the two Bennetts to remind the audience of the frame-narrative. 'It's supposed to be half past eleven at night' goes beyond the usual correcting and criticising the two Bennett-characters routinely engage in, because it refers to the 'pastness' of the episode, i.e. 'it is supposed' here means 'the way you've told the story before'. The phrase signifies that Bennett is prioritising the telling of the story rather than the complete evocation of the situation and the time it happened in. Pushing Miss Shepherd in her chair so she can freewheel downhill

is a nice ending to a scene, the narrative immediately moves back to the frame, and even beyond, as the reminder of the play's priority over 'reality' takes us outside the world of the two Bennetts, into the world of the author writing them. Apart from being self-referential, the scene alerts the audience that the flow of the narrative cannot be taken for granted and may be deconstructed at any time.

Prince (1982:124) attributes the metanarrative sign with several functions. It contributes to the 'rhythm of the narrative by regularly slowing the pace at which new events are presented'. Furthermore, the metanarrative sign is as "characterisation device: a character who states the symbolic meaning of an event or explains a foreign locution clearly differs from characters who never perform similar actions". The sign also helps to "define a narrator, his narratee and their relationship. In the first place, the number, the kind and the complexity of a narrator's metanarrative comments can contribute to making him pompous or unassuming, modest or conceited, cunning or straightforward".

These three characteristics are evident in *Van*. The play's rhythm is determined by the extradiegetic asides by the two Bennetts. These also remind us of the special status of these narrators, as not only being the masters of the plot, but also the stage representation of its author. Another example highlights the process of storytelling while the story is being told: the two Bennetts are anxious about Miss Shepherd, who has not emerged from the van in some days, and Alan Bennett 2 accuses his more ruthless other half: "You're scared this may be the end of the story and now I'm going to have to tell it." (*Van*:57) This quotation includes both the stepping in and out of the narrative, as well as the way 'real' life events are used to feed the stories that appear on stage, although their exploitation is supposedly undertaken with some reluctance. 'I'm going to have to tell it' also suggests that Alan Bennett 2 feels that, after Alan Bennett has identified some exciting material, he is the one to be burdened with the actual writing process, which he has often described as difficult and solitary.

Van is a text that makes clear Bennett's wish to control the ways in which his work is interpreted. According to Prince (1984:125), the use of metanarrative signs enforces this notion, as they "present a model for its [the text's] decipherment. In other words, they partially show how a given text could be understood, how it should be understood, how it wants to be understood."

[...] On the one hand, then, metanarrative signs help us understand a narrative in a certain way; on the other hand, they force us (try to force us) to understand it in this way and not another. They thus constitute the answer of a text to the question: "How should we interpret you?" (Prince 1984:125)

The two Bennett's also express feelings of guilt. The theme of writing as 'the devil's work' has become stronger in recent years. In *Van*, Bennett finds a new way of discussing his own ambiguous feelings about his profession through the two Bennetts. It is the first work, introductions and prefaces set apart (see Chapter 6), where Bennett expresses concern over the use of other people without the disguise of fictionality. The two Bennett-protagonists' disagreements on issues of ethics and writer's guilt make Bennett's own ambiguity on these issues transparent. Even though he presents his use of real people as ruthless, nobody is exposed or harmed by it in *Van*, as all people involved other than himself are dead. Even though the play is about a time when both old ladies, Miss Shepherd and Mam, were still alive, Bennett waited until five years after his mother's death in 1993 (Miss Shepherd died in 1989) before finishing the play.

A Bennett 2:	And where is she [Bennett's mother]?
A Bennett	Weston-super-Mare.
A Bennett 2	Except you're seldom so frank as that. When people ask you don't say she's in a home; you lie and say she's with my brother in Bristol. (<i>Van</i> : 48)

After the security of a happy, if uneventful childhood, Bennett's relationship with his mother was changed by the worsening of her depression when he was in his late twenties. Episodes of delusion and disturbed outbreaks regularly led to hospitalisation, and, with the onset of Alzheimer's disease in older age, Lillian Bennett eventually lost her speech and her mind. Her inclusion in the play is a departure from the diary-version of *Van*, where she

does not feature at all. Alan Bennett 2 expresses discomfort at his mother sharing the stage with Miss Shepherd in the play; not only is he uncomfortable with the two old ladies being compared to each other at all, but at them even sharing the same sentence (*Van*:50). The mother characters in Bennett's plays follow a similar trajectory to Bennett's own development. They are mothers in disguise at first, a prototype, based on Lillian Bennett and sometimes her sisters, Auntie Kathleen and Auntie Myra. In the play, the gradually deteriorating, timid delusion of Mrs Bennett is set against the unapologetic, arrogant delusion of Miss Shepherd. In the case of his mother, the Alan Bennett 2's guilt is aggravated by having to admit that he cannot and does not want to care for her permanently, whereas he is being charitable to Miss Shepherd, who never shows any gratitude or appreciation. Bennett's guilt for his literary exploitation is made worse by Miss Shepherd's question of whether she will be written about next, or whether he will at least wait until she is dead:

Miss Shepherd	How's your mother?
A. Bennett	The same. Doesn't remember me now.
Miss Shepherd	I'm not surprised. She doesn't see you very often. Will you write about me?
<i>Alan Bennett looks enquiringly at Alan Bennett 2.</i>	
A Bennett	I don't know. She never said this.
A. Bennett 2	So?
Miss Shepherd	You write about your mother.
A Bennett	She didn't say that either.
A Bennett 2	No, but why shouldn't she?
Miss Shepherd	You write about her all the time, one way and another. You use your mother.
A Bennett	(<i>looking at Alan Bennett 2</i>) That's what writers do.
Miss Shepherd	Me next, I suppose.
A Bennett	Y...possibly. (<i>Van</i> :62)

Miss Shepherd's accusations of Bennett exploiting his mother, and his likely plans to exploit her are not based on 'reality'. In the quotation above, Alan Bennett points out that 'she [Miss Shepherd] never said this', signalling that he is expressing his own guilt through the character he has written.

- A. Bennett 2: I can't work. And the van doesn't help. When I can't work I watch her.
- A. Bennett: So write it down.
- A. Bennett 2: No. I write about one old woman as it is. Mam. The last thing I want to do is write about another. (*Van*:15)

In the play and in its introduction, the character Alan Bennett 2 tries to persuade himself that writing down things related to Miss Shepherd does not mean he is storing them in preparation for eventual publication. This tone of 'denial' matches the author's own, for example, Bennett agreeing publication of his diaries after Miss Shepherd's death. He describes it as something undertaken rather reluctantly as a favour to a friend, Mary Kay Wilmers, editor of *The London Review of Books*. But it is Bennett himself who puts the deluded old ladies in the same sentence, and compares their cases, and it is also Bennett who is taken aback by the consequences on his conscience. The three-way relationship between the two Bennetts on stage and their author means that these mixed feelings and thoughts can be expressed and rejected at the same time. It is not suggested that Bennett, like some *Talking Heads* characters, is 'in denial' about what he is doing, but demonstrates his unease by writing about his guilty conscience. It is the self-consciousness of Bennett's presentation of self which also makes him torn between the role of narrator – telling us how it was – and the role of commentator/judge – telling us how it could/should have been.

Van is a very confessional text, where Bennett freely discusses anxieties, preoccupations, and, most importantly, his worries about the way he is perceived by the world, and especially by his audience.

- A. Bennett Look. This has been one path through my life...me and Miss Shepherd. Just one track. I wrote things; people used to come and stay the night, and of both sexes. What I mean to say is, it's not as if it's the whole picture. Lots of other stuff happened. No end of things.
- A. Bennett 2 They know that. (*Van*:87)

Alan Bennett's life and his work have been determined by each other. His work has been shaped by autobiographical material, and his life has been influenced by the way he has constructed himself through his work. While there is evidence that there might be more

deliberation behind his self-fashioning than he admits to, Bennett nonetheless resents the problems the blurred boundaries between life and art can bring. By way of solving the dilemma, he deconstructs the 'truth' factor at the end of *Van* by ending the play on a note of relativity and unreliability, as the quotation above shows. Apart from the enforcement of the text as a metanarrative, these transgressions present innovative solutions for an autobiographical discourse, showing post-modern fragmentation in practice. The two Bennett characters mean that Alan Bennett has embraced the notion of being in two minds, and his play is not about resolving this conflict, but about showing this ambiguity. He settles for being in two minds as a permanent state, making it an innovative autobiographical statement rather than a deficiency, although it is satirised and presented as a shortcoming.

The narrator is normally a tool that emphasises a level of truth outside the diegetic construct of a fictional world, but in *Van* the two Bennetts are used to demonstrate the author's own intentional unreliability. Looking at the way in which Bennett has been working on solutions that allow him to use his life, but shield him from too many simplistic stereotypes, *Van* seems an attempt at autobiography without the side-effects. At the end of the play, not even Alan Bennett 2 takes Alan Bennett's insistence that he has had a 'life' seriously:

A Bennett: And that's true. I'm not making it up

A. Bennett 2: Of course you're not.

He puts his arm around him and they go off together. (*Van*:87)

It is significant that the statements contradicting the 'cuddly playwright' stereotype come from the character Alan Bennett. Although he is supposedly closer to 'the real me' than his other half, his points are laughed off – nobody is, after all, interested in the wild and subversive side of a national treasure. The 1999 West End production makes this clear, Alan Bennett 2 speaking to Alan Bennett as if he were an agitated patient. The ending demonstrates Bennett's long-term ambition of 'longing to misbehave' (see above, Frears interview). He has always referred to his inability to stray from the truth as a deficiency for a writer. The unreliability of the narrative in *Van* brings Bennett closer to his ambition of

being able to lie in a way he associates with 'proper' writers. It also allows him to correct his 'nice', 'heartfelt, but dull' persona as someone who can be ruthless, manipulative and exploitative – less of a historian and more of a playwright, in brief. In *Van*, Bennett attempts to make things up, and be less ashamed about admitting to the thin line between fact and fiction. It is suggested that, within Bennett's trajectory, *Van* is the next step on from the implied author, which combines enforcement of the authorial persona, and a playfully provocative display of the relationship between 'real life' and 'textually constructed' author. In *Van*, Bennett has broken down the boundaries between material which previously would have been placed in a preface rather than a play (see Chapter 6). So, with the deconstruction of form and of the author's reliability, there is also a deconstruction of Bennett's previous boundaries of self-representation.

9) Conclusion: On the Margin

Bennett has become “a universally recognised turn” who knows what is expected of him. Readers and audience “want more of the same, please, with just enough variation to show it’s not actually a repeat. It can’t be easy.” (Sexton 2001:20)

Alan Bennett manages to mirror both the qualities and the insecurities that are seen as essentially English: the embarrassment, the understatement, the self-deprecation. He seems to represent both national and regionally specific English characteristics.

Bennett’s preface to a publication on the local history of Headingley reinforces his pride in the parochial.

I’m glad that so much of the area has survived and that it’s more valued for its character and interest now than then it ever was then. Leeds is full of such submerged villages. Armley, Bramley and Kirkstall are others, with buildings often of remarkable antiquity and it’s right that their history should be told as David Hall tells Far Headingley’s here. It will enhance the pleasure of living in such a definite community and foster its sense of identity. I’m just a little disturbed, though, that I’ve passed so soon into history.
(Hall 2000:xxi)

Bennett engages with notions of Englishness in literature, history and art, engaging mainly with the past. He does so in a voice that is accessible to a wide audience and through a public persona that manages to combine the sharpness of an Oxford wit and the unthreatening familiarity of a national treasure. Bennett, it seems, wants to be liked: “I always think the reason why I’m popular is that I’m no threat.”¹

Public adoration obviously brings with it an obligation. Consequently, Bennett often censors his own work when he feels it does not correspond to his image. He sees it as his mission not to inflict the dark side of his writing on his readership, calling current developments in his writing “too bleak to visit on the public” (Hill 2001:n.pag.). His last short story, “The Laying on of Hands” (2001), is “as dark as I could let myself be publicly without being rejected altogether.” (Ibid) Bennett felt this much-feared rejection with two plays which could be described as odd ones out within his oeuvre: *Enjoy* (1980), which was rejected by both critics and audiences when it opened in the

West End for presenting an unexpectedly bitter and dysfunctional picture of the north. *The Old Crowd* (1979) received even harsher treatment for being a departure from Bennett's usual style (see also Lindsay Anderson in Bennett *The Writer in Disguise* 161 – 175). Bennett was enthusiastic about the chance to take more experimental approach, stating that "the play's greatest virtue is that it does not seem like mine" (15). It seems, therefore that Bennett wants to be both the established persona, commenting and observing from his familiar and 'much loved' perspective, and an author who takes risks and departs from what is expected of him.

My study suggests that Bennett uses his talents in negotiating genre and pitch to underline his permanent state of being in two minds. The following quotations express two very different positions on the role of childhood memories in an author's work:

The Boyhood of Alan Bennett must by now be one of the most closely described subjects in all literature, outdoing the life of Napoleon and the battlefields of the First World War. He has, surely spent longer telling us about it now than he did living it. If only he had known at the time how the entire nation would come to share its every minute! Yet he has still not exhausted its riches of deprivation, incongruity and provinciality. (Sexton 2001:n.pag)

Anyone of any distinction at all should, on reaching a certain age, be taken away for a weekend at the state's expense, formally interviewed and stripped of all their recollections. (Bennett, *Diaries*, *LRB* 2001:6)

Despite this statement, Bennett has, in Eyre's words, been carefully mining his childhood and earlier life, making his recollections the most important source in his works by far in the last ten years. Bennett comments on his perspective:

Bennett: It's also much better if things are happening on the edge of frame – ideally the best film would be where everything was on the edge of frame and just very ordinary things happening in the foreground. (Badder 1978:73)

Bennett's work reflects this statement. Until the late 1990s, his writing magnifies characters and occurrences in the background or on the margins of a picture. With this technique, Bennett makes significant what might be passed over as unimportant, making sure that attention is paid to it. His literary preference for outsiders and marginalised characters creates seemingly banal lives, which then reveal unexpectedly complex

¹ Alan Bennett in *Book of the Month*, 5 Jan 2003, BBC Radio 4.

worlds.² The respectable middle-aged lady is a part-time prostitute, a vicar's wife enjoys sexual liberation with her Asian grocer, and a nonagenarian, fragile woman discusses sex. In exposing the territory between the mundane and the unexpected, the 'margins' of characters (but also characters on the margin), Bennett has formulated what can be deemed a preference for liminal spaces. He explains this using visual art as a metaphor. In a piece in the *Guardian Weekend* (Dec. 11 1999, p.35), he states that colour means more to him than line, ('..so I've never much cared for drawings'), and that he prefers contiguity to contrast, liking 'the edge of colours'.

I see this as a general principle going way beyond art or decoration. On television, for instance, it seems to me that people of widely differing views, contrasting colours, if you like, are less interesting to listen to than people whose views are different but quite close together. So when I came to start writing, I found I preferred to deal with the edges of emotion rather than their extremes, irritation rather than anger, melancholy rather than grief. I avoid clash, my instinct always for adjacence, ambiguity and being in two minds.

Liminality,³ a term that conceptualises the transition between two states, while belonging to neither, has become Bennett's permanent place. Occupying a liminal space has many advantages for Bennett: he can relate back to the more definitive areas on either side, without fully committing to their rules and restrictions. Bennett thus travels with ease between genres, occupying their liminal spaces, between northern and southern literary landscapes, and between being politically left and socially conservative. This thesis locates Bennett not as an author who breaks the rules of conventions, but who excludes himself from being subject to these rules. He can either be a conformist who enjoys playing the non-conformist, or conform where he is not expected to conform.

² Stephen Frears: I think I sometimes tend to concentrate on the peripheral events in my films rather than what's happening at the centre. It seems to happen every time and I'm sure comes from the three writers. Alan Bennett, Peter Price and Neville Smith, whom I've mainly worked with. If you think of those three writers, the bits they write at the edges are wonderful. You can't pretend that Neville has a strong sense of plot, and Alan writes a very simple short story, and with Peter the convolutions are more interesting than the simplicities. (Badder 1978:73)

³ The term 'liminality' (from Latin 'limen' – threshold) is often used in reference to the transitional state within a rite of passage. It refers to the condition in which one state of being is left and another is entered. While in liminal transition, the subject is 'in between' and is therefore a kind of non-person until s/he emerges on the other side. See also <www.wordreference.com>

Other aspects of liminality have been discussed in this thesis, with particular emphasis on the principle of autobiographical exposure made safe through a number of measures, notably disguise and narrative unreliability. Bennett has developed measures that allow him to occupy a permanent transitional stage, and has protected himself from exposure, while simultaneously disclosing detailed and intimate accounts of what might be his private or his real self. Bennett performs a ‘double bluff’ – he tells the biographically interested audience the story of his ‘life’, but edits it through multiple versions to avoid committing himself to any single account. He remains resistant in order to avoid the biographical usurpation by others.

The spy exists with equal authenticity in two opposing worlds, while feeling authentic in neither. He moves back and forth, observing, recording, seeing without being seen. He can even (as Burgess is constantly doing) reveal his secret from time to time, knowing that no one will take it entirely seriously. (Eyre 2000:330)

Bennett has been successful in negotiating his various identities through quiet, defiant subversion, trying to make sure he is not usurped by others’ attempts to categorise, analyse and simplify his work and persona:

Audience question: You said once you’d rather the public had an image of you you’d not quite fit – that way, you’re free. So, in a sense, you’re playing a game which you’ve managed to win.

Alan Bennett: Up to a point, yes. But there’s always....they get you in the end!⁴

However, despite the growing critical interest in his work and the inaccuracies this might present for the author in the way he would like to be seen, Bennett has the option of ignoring interventions from what he has called the “academic undergrowth” (*Poetry*:2):

I think when I’ve finished trying to write I’ll then start reading what’s been written about me.⁵

⁴ Alan Bennett in *Book of the Month*, 5 Jan 2003, BBC Radio 4.

⁵ Postcard to K. McKechnie, acknowledging receipt of MA thesis *The Theatre of Alan Bennett*, 27 Aug. 1997.

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11) Appendices

11) Appendices

11.1) Interview with Alan Bennett

Book Club

Radio 4, Jan. 5, 2003.

Interviewer: James Naughtie

James Naughtie: You have preserved something of your personality which has remained intact. How have you managed it?

Alan Bennett: I suppose it's because I think of myself as quite shy, although I'm not as shy probably as I imagine. Both my parents were fairly shy, shyness in our family was regarded as a bit of a virtue, which I don't think it is really, anymore. But it involves keeping yourself to yourself, and I suppose that's stuck with me since childhood. And I do sometimes even now when I'm writing something or thinking something 'Oh, my father wouldn't like that'.

Q (audience): He's a very private person, and yet he's talking about publishing an account of his parents' marriage. With the values he was brought up with...wouldn't your parents be appalled at their marriage becoming public property? Isn't that a betrayal?

AB: No, I don't think so. They're both dead, and you can't go on subscribing to their views necessarily, simply out of respect. Philip Roth said that nobody is fully a writer until his father's dead. And in a sense, their deaths release you from obligations like that. And also, the story about their marriage is not sensational. It's told in the context that she in later life suffered from severe depression, which she I suppose would have liked to have kept private, but I think it's something you should write about, because it's something that affects an enormous number of people and isn't talked about.

Q: When you are writing about your family and the past, it seems as though you're still a writer of fiction – so, to what extent do you fictionalise the past, and to what extent am I reading about your family, both as people in real life and as people you've created?

AB: I think the perspective intensifies it – it's like when you're driving, the view in the rear mirror is somehow more vivid than the view through the windscreen. But I don't fictionalise it, and I often feel I'd be a better writer, or even that I'm not a proper writer because I don't lie enough. Writers do lie, and it's part of the job, and it took a long time until I started writing about it [..] It always seemed to me quite

boring. Philip Larkin spoke about his childhood as a forgotten boredom, and that certainly rang a bell with me.

Q: When did it cease to be boring?

AB: When I went in the Army. I went into the Infantry, and then on to a course where you learnt Russian. It was the first time I was ever away from home, and I found it a wonderful time, much better than when I eventually went to Oxford 2 years later.

Q: To go away from home for the first time and to be sunk [?] in Russian is quite a combination of circumstances, isn't it?

AB: It was strange being brought up against a collection of really quite clever people. At school, I'd always been in the top 3 or 4 in the class, and suddenly you were with a group of people who were much cleverer than you were, and that was quite disconcerting. Michael Frayn was one of them. I remember particularly boys from Christ [?] Hospital were very, very bright and aggressively intellectual. I'd never come across people like that before.

Q: Larkin has been mentioned. I like the piece where he says that authors resent the knowledge they have volunteered to their readers. Do you have any regrets about any revelations you've made?

AB: No, not really. Experience has taught me that it's best to say as little as possible about the most private things in your life. I mean, I made some casual remarks to the New Yorker once about a friend of mine, and it was then presented in the Daily Mail as if I'd gone to the Daily Mail with some revelation. It's the press – and I don't mean just the tabloids; the broadsheets are as bad – they are becoming increasingly infantile about any relationship – the justification is that, if you are a public figure, then you're fair game. But what's a public figure – someone who writes a book?

Q: You said once you'd rather the public had an image of you you'd not quite fit – that way, you're free. So, in a sense, you're playing a game which you've managed to win.

AB: Up to a point, yes. But there's always....they get you in the end!

Q: Do you think you've managed to stay popular and within the affections of the British public, because it's very fashionable now for people to bear their souls. And this experience of giving enough, but not very much of yourself – has that maybe been a reason why you've remained so popular?

AB: Maybe. Hadn't occurred to me. I always think the reason why I'm popular is that I'm no threat. [laughter]

Q: I think people are quite intrigued by you, actually.

AB: There's nothing much to be intrigued by.

Q: I thought what you did with Miss Shepherd was either saintly or lunacy. [...] She obviously learned a lot from you – what did you learn from her?

AB: I don't know if she did learn a lot from me. I don't think she learned a lot from anybody. Even God, who was the person she talked to most often... I suppose, not to intrude on someone's life. I mean, I observed her, I wrote down the things she said, but I didn't actually try to get to know her, which was partly because it was futile. It was obvious within a few months of her being there that she resented any attempt to pry into what she thought, and she would only volunteer the information she wanted. So the fact that she had been a promising pianist [...] I never knew that while she was alive [...] She didn't hesitate to lecture me on what she thought I ought to do, and how I ought to vote, particularly, and how I was supposed to ring the police if children were making a noise in the street....

Q: If someone came along in a van tomorrow, would you do the same thing again?

AB: No, but it didn't present itself like that. And when you say 'Am I a Saint or a lunatic?', well, lunatic is nearer to it, but there is a common sense explanation for it. In a sense, it was self-protection [...] If somebody had said to me that it was going to be for 15 years, I wouldn't have done it. And I think that's true of a lot of things in life. It was a corner turned, but I wasn't aware of that. It was something that always seemed as if it was going to end, until I got so used to it, I never thought it would end, and then she suddenly died.

Q: It's very benign.

AB: Well, it wasn't benign at the time. I mean, she could reduce me to helpless fury. [...] I can see that there's a sense in which I reveal things about myself in relation to her, for instance, particularly my fastidiousness. I noticed it when she died. I'd never been in the van, and had no cause to go in, and she would never have let me in [...] But, on the morning she died, the Priest got in without any hesitation [...] And I thought 'You're a better man than I am'.

Q: Do you feel any guilt over that? She lived in these absolutely appalling conditions on your doorstep, and in 15 years, you only let the poor woman use the toilet three times?!

AB: No, but she never asked to use it! [...] I think if she'd come and said boldly, then I would have had to face it, but she didn't.

Q: I loved George III. Now that I've 'met' Miss Shepherd, I wonder if you're so fascinated by madness...

AB: I am not particularly fascinated by madness. Having written about my mother's depression; that took place in the 60s and 70s, when madness was in a sense 'fashionable', it was a time when RD Laing was very much the public guru of madness, putting forward the view that the mad were the truly sane. [essence of *King George*] But that seemed to me so untrue to my own experience, or to my mother's experience. This depression, which was unliveable with, and anybody who has had an experience of depression can concur that depressives try and convert you to their view of the world [...] There was no way in which I could see this as redemptive, or had a positive side to it at all, and so, if I am interested in madness, it is really through standing on one side to what people think or used to think.

Q: I think you deal very carefully with writing about women; you are very kind to them.

AB: I find it easier writing about women or for women, because when I was a child, the women did all the talking in the family [...] My mother wasn't overly talkative. [...] They were always talking about boyfriends and affairs, but this was never clear to me. Men kept appearing and disappearing, and I never realised that that was why. [...] Even though you're writing dialogue for people now, it's stuff that was laid down years ago when you were listening without realising you were listening.

Q: When you wrote these diary entries, did you do so conscious that they would some day be published, or did you write them 'au naturel', and then decided that they could be.

AB: I didn't write them because I thought they would be published, although I suppose I do now, but I first started keeping a diary in 1974 (which was the year my father died, coincidentally). I didn't publish anything from it until 10 years later, probably. And even now, although I regularly publish an extract in the London Review of Books, though I didn't last year, because nothing had happened to me worthwhile [...] There's an enormous amount which I don't put in, simply because it, as most diaries, is full of complaints, and tedium and grouching, but that's partly what a diary's for. So a lot of it is unpublishable. What I do publish is just the tip of quite a large iceberg.

Q: What do you think about people like Tony Benn and Dick Crosswell, writing a diary which was from the first day intended for publication?

AB: I think that's to do with self-justification, and not with self-examination. It's to do with projecting some sort of image. I think both of them recorded their diaries [...] into a tape recorder. I don't do that. I think somehow that that's doing something else. Writing it down, and making some sort of a shape of the day is more of a

creative act. And I do it [...] to slow down time, because you get to the end of the year, and you think nothing's happened, and you read through your diary and remember things...and sometimes not very much has happened, like last year, but at other times you think 'I did that' and 'That was interesting'. and you do feel as if you've (like that phrase from *Forty Years On*), you've salvaged something from the wreck of time. So that's a worthwhile occupation. I'm sorry, I'm just burbling now.

Q: If you want to be a good satirist, do you need to keep yourself slightly apart from the things you satirise?

AB: Well, yes. But an apartness needn't be a physical apartness. For instance, the thing I wrote most recently called *The Laying on of Hands*, about a Memorial Service. Now, I go to umpteen Memorial Services; as you get older you do; it's one of your chief occupations. They're often for people I'm genuinely fond of, and I'm not just there out of duty – but obviously there's something that watches what's going on, and that watches one's behaviour on those occasions. Now, this is what is unseemly about a writer's job, that you're never wholehearted, however wholehearted you want to be, there's always this 'whatever' watching and noting what happens. I think it's Philip Roth who said about how he watched his father die, and how unseemly the process was, and although he found it very moving, he knew that he would write about it. And that's why Kafka said that writing was the devil's work. In a sense, you are standing back, and you are not wholeheartedly giving yourself to humanity. It's no different from the obvious moral dilemma of a photographer who is photographing some war crime, and photographs is rather than trying to stop it. A writer's in the same position.

Q: And you didn't start writing your diary until your father died.

AB: That's right, but it hadn't occurred to me until somebody asked me about it. That wasn't a definite decision, but it certainly happened after he'd died.

Q: You seem to identify with outsiders. Both physical outsiders, from somewhere else, but also people who have difficulty navigating the social codes around them. Do you feel yourself to be an outsider, and if so, what from?

AB: I don't think of myself as an outsider now, particularly, but I'm not a big joiner. I don't like parties, for instance, and I'm uneasy about social gatherings, but I think, again, this goes back to childhood. My parents' biggest ambition was to be like other people. But no family is like other families. But my mother believed what she read in *Women's* magazines. But they felt they were oddities, really, and the fact that they were not very social seemed to confirm that, and I think that some of that has been passed on to me. I regret it in a sense, but if I hadn't been like that I probably would have never put pen to paper.

11.2) Interview with Stephen Frears

Dec. 31, 2002

London, Notting Hill.

Stephen Frears: An American festival putting on a retrospective of Bennett's television plays] started asking about them [Bennett TV collaborations], and I said 'Is that the one, where...' And I said that all I could remember was the jokes. 'and then what happened?', and then she went off with him.. Oh I see' And they were sort of shocked! [laughter] And I said 'Listen, we used to shoot these in two weeks! And they weren't shot for posterity, they were shot....

Kara McKechnie: ...for showing once.

SF: It was good fun to shoot them, but we didn't shoot them conscious of the past and the future. But they were just amazed that I couldn't really remember. I could remember some stories when they triggered my memory.

KM: Some of them are limited in their storyline, such as 'to Fountain's Abbey and back'.

SF: A woman called Irene Shubik turned down *A Day Out*, saying it didn't really go anywhere, and Bennett responded that it went to Fountain's Abbey and back. [laughter] Do you mean they are slight? Yes, they were. You mean, slight as narratives?

KM: Yes. The emphasis is more on interaction.

SF: Interaction – that wasn't a word that had been invented in those days. The first one [*A Day Out*] I think was 23 pages long. There was an emotion of...I know he wrote some work, and he was surprised how robust the characters were. And the actors only had about 2 or 3 lines, and they were having such a good time. So I don't quite know where the emphasis lay, except that he'd had these little ideas for scenes, inspired by a photograph of a men's cycling club. There were these little exchanges, that was really all. The surprise was how things turned out, started turning out underneath, more complicated. So we must have done a good job....I do remember getting very good actors. But not a great deal of interaction between the characters.

KM: Observation?

SF: Yes, observation, and a sort of mode, and a sort of selection, a sort of selected taste. Things he [Bennett] chose to pick out.

- KM: *A Day Out* was written in Yorkshire idiom; the only time Bennett wrote in dialect.
- SF: Is that right?!
- KM: And he'd spend quite a long time explaining how it should be pronounced. But he learned somehow not to do it. [...] That was your first collaboration. Did you know each other before?
- SF: Yes. I met him at the Royal Court. I was an assistant, and he came to play in a play by Ben Travers, called *A Cuckoo in the Nest*, and he played the part of ???, rather unsurprisingly, and I got to know him there. That's when he went back and said to the woman whom I married 'I've found someone you can marry' or 'I've found you a husband' or something, which was faintly sinister, I always thought.
- KM And you did?
- SF I did, yes. And then I got to know him through Mary-Kay, whom I then married. And they were very friendly from Oxford, and then (I can't remember the chronology), he wrote *Forty Years On*, what year was that?
- KM '68.
- SF: Is that right? No, it can't be...oh, right, '68, if you say so. And then suddenly this script appeared. *Forty Years On* was directed by Patrick Garland, and then he wrote a play that Kenneth More was in [*Getting On*, 1972], Patrick also directed that. And there was some row, Kenneth More wouldn't say 'fuck' and Alan thought that Patrick should stand up to him.
- KM: It was that More made the rather disgusting Labour MP into a nice guy, in the matinee idol tradition, and Garland had Bennett banned from the theatre.
- SF: Oh, is that right...anyway, as a result of that, Patrick was removed from directing, and I had made my first film, which was called *Gumshoe* (1972), and then Alan said 'Well, you better do this'. And I remember going to the BBC to see about the job on a Monday, and my film had opened on the Friday to the most incredible reviews. And when I appeared at the BBC - and I didn't really know much - they said 'what would you like?'. They couldn't believe that this man who'd had these wonderful review wanted to make television drama and of course it turned out to be exactly the right thing to do. It's how I learnt my job. Well, in retrospect I can see that's what happened: I went to learn my job, although I didn't see that that's what was happening.
- KM: I am very interested in your early career in television.
- SF: It's all to do with the construction of BBC2.

KM: Did you work in the *Wednesday Play/ Play for Today* slot?

SF: No, I was a freelance.

KM: So the directors for those were all contracted?

SF: No. The producers were contracted, and maybe directors who did *Z Cars* were contracted, but I was not one of those, certainly. We were all freelance, we were just hired job to job. But in fact, and again, this is all in hindsight, you can see that... I remember there was once an interview with Christopher Morahan, who was Head of Drama at the BBC, he implied that the system of patronage was quite deliberate. I mean, it was very, very privileged, but they did pick certain people out. It just never felt like that, you just went from job to job to job, and you auditioned for a job and got it.

KM: The thing you notice (again, this has received great academic interest), is that the form of television drama gradually moves from single play to season...

SF: That came later. I must have done *Wednesday Plays*, some of the things I did. I think *Sunset Across the Bay* was probably a Wednesday Play. There were these odd strands. There were producers who were on different kinds contracts from us, and they had to deliver so many hours a year. And they were clever people, and they were given freedom, and everyone was working in collaboration, so the producer wouldn't do something that the Head of Drama wouldn't allow... there were never real arguments... there was always some kind of petition going on, people were very militant, but basically it was a group of very clever people, supported by the BBC.

KM: A lot of people refer to it as the Golden Age.

SF: Well, particularly in the 70s, it was. Cinema was very bad. I mean, I did... you did three or four of these a year. It's really all to do with the writing, because the quality of the writing was very very high. I don't quite know what happened before I turned up, you'd be better off talking to Tony Garnett. It might be Sidney Newman who somehow changed it [Armchair Theatre]. He got just the best writers in. I mean, Harold Pinter and David Mercer were all, like a bottleneck, going in there. And whoever was responsible for that, which is, I imagine, a sort of line between Sidney Newman and Christopher Morahan. Well done. They had people fighting against them; Tony was always in opposition, except he was just as clever as they were, and his values were as good as there. It was like ferrets in a sack, except the ferrets were all from the same sort of education.

KM: So they collaborated.

SF: Yes. Or, you could say, they shut the whole thing down, and it was very privileged.

KM: The question of quality triumphed over business. You said in *Typically British* that you were just told to make a good play.

SF: It was only about getting another job. So the approval of your peers was really all that mattered. I mean, I can see the advantages and the disadvantages of that. It did have a very strong system of collective values.

Alan at the time would have been regarded – because the ethos was rather left wing – so Alan would have been regarded as a rather dangerous eccentric. He was so clever that he was very hard to attack, but he wasn't ostensibly a left wing writer. Because he was so clever, you could see that people could not attack him in a way they might have attacked other people.

KM: The way he describes it is as himself is as the perennial outsider.

SF: He's right, he's right. But because he was so classy, and people *did* know class when they saw it...it suits himself to see himself like that. Actually, I've never met anyone as clever in my life.

We had this rather eccentric producer, Innes [Lloyd] who wasn't a fashionable producer. And Innes had done some sports broadcasting, outside broadcasting. So it was all kind of in the wrong place.

KM: Stylistically, *Sunset* and *Day Out* are quite different from your average *Wednesday Play*, both shot entirely on location.

SF: No. Large parts of *Cathy Come Home* were shot on location. Ken [Loach] invented BBC films. There would be this percentage of film, and this percentage of studio, and he'd, 'why can't it be this [larger] percentage?', and pushed and pushed. I think bits of *Cathy* were done in the studio, but I never asked him. But then they just started making films, before I came along. Films were being made by then. And Alan's writing...you couldn't get it into the studio, it was inconceivable going into the studio, before it eventually did go into the studio. Yes, it was just in the texture of the writing that it was a film, so there wasn't a discussion, there was just 'Do you want to make this film?' The BBC then were making – again, there would be a figure – but they were making a lot of films.

Where we were, we got very high ratings. People were interested I what we were doing. I don't know why; they just were. That was the fashion of the times.

KM: Academic studies describe the transition from single play to season. And although the outsider, Bennett moved along with that. He started with single plays like *Sunset*, and then moved on to seasons, loosely connected, such as *The Writer in Disguise*, even though they were only given that title in retrospect.

SF: What was *The Writer in Disguise*?

KM: The six plays you did for LWT.

SF: They weren't called *The Writer in Disguise* at the time we did them.

KM: No, they weren't, that's the title of the published script; put together in retrospect.

SF: That was just...well, he wrote six plays! If he could have detected a theme in them, that would be clever, but I certainly couldn't.

KM: He says that at least three of the characters are a version of himself.

SF: Neville [Smith] used to play him. There's one called *Me! I'm Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, and that's when Neville first started playing Alan. Neville was a writer and an actor, and so he could play a writer in a way that actors quite often can't.

KM: It [Me!] has Bennett's voice-over.

SF: Oh, is that right? Why did it have Alan's voice, not Neville's?

KM: I think it was because there had to be somebody different from Hopkins to tell what he is really thinking, in contrast to his behaviour (or performances gone wrong, as Goffman would say).

SF: It's very, very good, isn't it?

KM: I think so. I walked past one of the locations the other day, the Civic Restaurant underneath the Town Hall.

SF: Is that still there? That's where Thora [Hird] did her piece. There was a case going on while we were shooting; he [Bennett] writes about that. They were somehow left over from the war, those restaurants.

KM: It's an innovative piece, where you have the rather passive and silent protagonist, and the voice over which is telling us what the real intention behind his strange behaviour is.

SF: Again, the truth is, we used to have these ideas, and you'd think 'We can do this'. I remember when Dennis [Potter] wrote *Pennies from Heaven*, we were all frightfully rude, because we used to have half a second, and he used to have the whole song; why did he have to do all this stuff out there? So I don't particularly remember the piece being formally innovative, I just remember it being very, very funny. And there's a thesis on Virginia Woolf you should look at. She [Brenda Silver] wrote to me and to Alan and to Hanif [Kureishi], as there is also a bit in *Sammy and Rosie*. And she distilled this rather brilliant argument, and worked out that we were all really hooligans – while we were all intelligent, we were also hooligans. And Alan

was a hooligan. I was very impressed that she could have distilled this from our work. There's a very, very good essay by David Hare, called "On Mischief". He described this [incomprehensible] as he was writing *Licking Hitler*, about black...anyway, counter-espionage. And Hugh Carlton Green said 'Now, why would you be writing about that, except to make mischief?!' And then he leans back and says 'Ah, mischief!' So, hooliganism, or mischievousness...because the whole thing was like a sort of public school, the whole BBC was like a public school, so larking about was part of it, trying to somehow get away with it. So, a lot of it in *Virginia Woolf* relates to that. There's a rather wonderful Maths master who launches these attacks on art; we got immense pleasure from that, and from all the jokes. The classes are very funny aren't they?

KM: Yes, there's the smartass, there's the swot, and there's the young liberated man, Skinner...and the Yoga classes.

SF: That's right. So, being an artist was just an invitation to be pelted with abuse!

KM *Me!* and *Intensive Care* probably get the most attention of all the television plays.

SF: I wouldn't do it [*Intensive Care*]; I refused to do it; that was when I fell out with him.

KM: You said that on *Fame, Set and Match*.

SF: I never saw it; was that on recently, about *Beyond the Fringe*?

KM: Yes.

SF: Oh, of course, *Me!* had all the gay stuff in it; and it had Derek Thompson in it [laughs]; and there's all that stuff with *South Pacific* in it. Alan wrote that as music, and then I said 'Wait 'till you see the lyrics!' [laughter] That was just a sort of accident – I had the soundtrack of the film, and I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

KM: You know it's been shown at the London Gay and Lesbian Film Festival?

SF: That one? Yes.

KM: It's a rich text: it's got the writer in the disguise, slightly non-naturalistic elements, the gay stuff, it's got the biography connection, it's got the attacks on art, creative achievement and fame does not really make you happy....and it has the happy ending, a Bennett play. Shock, horror...

SF: Who I remember...in Leeds...I can remember directing on the floor...there was one I didn't want to do. I asked Lindsay to do *The Old Crowd*, and I was trying to get other directors.

- KM: Giles Foster did *All Day on the Sands*.
- SF: I remember talking to Alan Clark...I ended up doing more than I intended. There were six of them: I did *Doris & Doreen*...I remember Pat [Routledge] coming in and saying she'd got the 31, a well known bus...at one point we had Joan Plowright and Arthur Lowe.
- KM: That's the treachery of published version, because *Miss Protheroe* and *Doris and Doreen* were published together as *Office Suite*.
- SF: Not in my head. *Doris & Doreen* was the first, and then we did *Virginia Woolf*. In the spring Giles must have done his, and then we went to Hartlepool.
- KM: You found the location for *Afternoon Off*, didn't you?
- SF: Yes, it was originally set in Harrogate, and I found Hartlepool.
- KM: You said you were fascinated by the contrast of someone waterskiing across the bay...
- SF: ..and the men picking up coal on the beach. And it had this long street, in the western town [Seaton Carew]. Harrogate seemed somehow...I was always concerned about repeating jokes, 'I've done this joke!'
- KM: Bennett very often uses the same joke in a number of different context.
- SF: Yes, I was always rather rigorous. I remember starting to read *About a Boy*, and seeing jokes that were in *High Fidelity*. That upset me. So I was always very insistent that we couldn't repeat jokes. The jokes are what I mainly remember, because they were so funny.
- KM: I think *Afternoon Off* changed with its change of location.
- SF: For the better or for the worse?
- KM: I think for the better. I can't really see it in Harrogate.
- SF: Hartlepool is a sort of poetic place, it's bleak...
Harold Innocent, some line about Black Magic better than Dairy. Ben, we called him 'Bollock Brain'. Every time I meet Ben Whiteroe, that's all we say. And all those girls I used to find in Mike Leigh films, girls at shoe shops. In the one with Dave Allen, there was a lot about cocktails, one girl doing this long thing about how to do cocktails. You'd meet these girls, people like Mary Maddock, and they were so wonderful, you just wanted them to be in somewhere. They were just so funny.

What's the one with Pedro the Fisherman? Is that *Afternoon Off*?

KM: Yes, and that's been recycled a couple of times.

SF: Who sang it? Who was on the stage? I remember finding a man leading the old lady pensioners. Ah well, I'm not doing badly! I cast it from this office in Leeds, a nice woman called Barbara, City Varieties. Ken used to do the same, he'd start casting from there. I was there when I heard my Dad had died. That was in '77.

[Pause]

SF One didn't think of the provinces in that way. It's much worse now. We were all from the provinces; it was just part of our lives.

KM: Maybe that's what made the plays work. What I like about your collaborations is that they were just about people, not about class in that rather anthropological way.

SF: Yes. The films were just a set of assumptions we made. I remember once, he talked about whether Peggy Ashcroft should be in *Sunset*. I was very, very startled. The realism was so central to it all. Morecambe, that was lovely, wonderful town. We were just given these amazing shots. [...]
But the 1960s and 70s architecture is just awful. I was once driving through Stoke, and the woman I was with fell into a depression, it was so depressing.

[Pause]

I was talking to Alan Yentob yesterday. I was always having this fight, I mean, I'm like this old carthorse 'Oh, you always say that!' And I would do these things for television – *Laundrette* I did for television, and *The Snapper* I did for television; they both ended up making a lot of money in the cinema. I got into a position where I could have it contractual, that they had to show it on television. *The Snapper* was a quite deliberate attempt to recreate the 70s. I then would make a film which was for television, and then they were able to manoeuvre me into agreeing to let it into the cinema. Yesterday, Alan was saying about a particular film 'It ought to be on television', and I said 'Well, of course, everything is going back towards that; you are going to have to face up to this quite soon. It's the most sensible medium for distribution there's ever been! The making of cinema films, it's just.....

[Pause]

KM: It takes two years per film.

SF: It takes two years, but it's not that. The odds are so stacked against you. You can't DO better than *Dirty Pretty Things*, and it's still like rolling a stone up the hill. In the end, you are competing with *Lord of the Rings*. No matter how much you say

‘Well, it’s got a different audience’ That’s what it’s in competition with, and you go down the Tube and you see fewer posters, and you think that the prices of posters have simply gone up. If I were running London, I’d put the price up!

[Pause]

KM: At the beginning of *Typically British*, the quote ‘Bollocks to Truffaut’ comes up, defending British film

SF: They wouldn’t let me call it that.

KM: On the other hand you say that it is impossible to succeed against the budget-giants of Hollywood. How does one face it?

SF: Well, facing it means not....it means being realistic, and being realistic. I now think that most films that are British [incomprehensible] just end up failing, even though the film made might be rather good. You fail, because, in the end, you go into a sort of commercial race which you simply don’t have the chance of winning. My friends in the theatre have also learnt to keep it small. Tom Stoppard was actually discovered in the Cottesloe – they have learnt that if you start bigger than that, you’ll get problems.

KM: The whole idea of competition seems very wrong. Different films for different audiences...

SF: Yes, but it is actually very difficult to invent a system that does that. ‘They’ could say, on the other hand, because we have a cinema with eleven screens, there could always be some odd film playing on one of them

[the following discussion is about *Prick Up Your Ears*]

SF: Orton was such a fashionable thing, that to work out that Halliwell deserved the sympathy, because Orton was so attractive, seems to me an extraordinary piece of thinking.

KM: Bennett put Halliwell in the role of the first wife, who’d supported the husband through the rough times, and then found she was dumped once success had been established.

SF: Yes, of course he would have known about all that. Peter Cook’s first wife was wonderful, she was a sort of art student. So the notion of becoming successful – because Alan had seen all that with Peter....and Orton was as glamorous and successful as Peter. So Alan would have instinctively sympathised. He was seeing it acted out in front of him, especially with Peter.....and I’d left my wife by then. By the time we worked on the film, everyone was into their forties.

- KM: *Kafka's Dick* was similar. That took the case of Brod, whose work was eclipsed by that of Kafka.
- SF: Who played Brod? Jim [Broadbent] played the father, Roger [Lloyd Pack] played Kafka..
- KM: Andrew Sachs played Brod.
- SF: It's like an incestuous group. Richard [Eyre] directed it. It is the most closed world. [...]
- KM: Bennett's constantly repeating that he's quite an unimaginative playwright,
- SF: Yes, but he *doesn't* think like that. [...]
- KM: What do you think about his forms gradually becoming more and more reduced?
- SF: I can only give you a standard Beckettian answer to that, that minimalism gradually takes over.
- KM: Why do you think that happens?
- SF: Well, you can compare it to....Hanif asked me to do a script, it's now being done, a sort of chamber piece. Well, what I of course loved about 'Launderette' was that it was sprawling everywhere, all over the place, like a TV advert. So, I think, writers just become more minimal as they get older.
- KM: Do you also think they become bleaker?
- SF: That's what *Alan* says...it's not even depression, it's just middle age. [...] I just love it when life sprawls out at all the corners, when it's chaotic and full of life.
- KM: Maybe it's to do with moving out from behind the disguise, and talking about 'I' much more, *Telling Tales*, *Lady in the Van*....
- SF: *The Lady in the Fucking Van*...
(laughter)
- KM: I liked that comment [on *Fame, Set and Match*] when you said 'they've got it wrong, she just frightened my children!'
- SF: I don't know, I didn't see the play, but she was just a horrible old woman! Germaine Greer was going on about this crazy British eccentric,

- KM: That's a fairly unusual thing to do, a playwright doubling up on stage...
- SF: Yes very 'Alan-like'. That's my first reaction to say it's very 'Alan-like' and Alan would take the precaution of saying himself that he disliked her [Miss Shepherd].
- KM: The contrast between somebody who's constantly running away, he says "treat me like a dead author – I don't do interviews". All the while this has been happening his work gets more – almost – exhibitionist. If you look at *Telling Tales* the detail describing the contents of his parents bedroom drawer – just getting more micro all the time really. It's something academics have to do all the time - and something Bennett obviously dreads – is that you identify trends and with the on-going formal reduction his work has become more of an exposure of himself and meanwhile he's also gained greater control of the process – he's executive producer, he's performer, he's writer and he has got his own production company.
- SF: It's not as polemic as that. It's more likely that Mark Shivas out of politeness would say 'maybe we should do that' and Alan would have control because his authority was so overwhelming – you took him on at your peril.
- KM: [Laughs] What, in an argument or in a working relationship?
- SF: If an actor was saying a line, Alan would insist on it being said another way and just destroy the actor's confidence.
- KM: I'm probably exaggerating this slightly but I think there is an urge to control exactly what goes out.
- SF: I would be slightly wary of that. I mean you control it in as much as – well firstly, you get depressed by incompetence so you try and eliminate that. But in the end if he is acting ... You would just find it very difficult to challenge him. There would be no reason too because he is cleverer, funnier. If he's the source of it all what's the point in challenging him? So in a way his power, well I wouldn't wish to underplay it. It's quite possibly more control ...
[...]
- KM: Can I ask about *Intensive Care*? You were supposed to do that ...
- SF: I was supposed to do it. I'd just done a film, I did Alan's plays then I did *Bloody Kids* and a play about Elvis's death (that never worked) ... And then I moved into this house [where he still lives] and then we tried to do *Prick Up Your Ears* – must have been in '80. With this terrible dreadful man ...
- KM: Who wanted the film to be set in America and make Orton straight?

- SF: He was just a stupid millionaire who'd struck oil. Anyway, I remember being out of work and then I was asked to do a book called *Walter* which eventually opened Channel 4. After that I did a play about two men dying of cancer which won awards. And then I did *Walter*. And then Alan asked me to do *Intensive Care*. I said I'd do it and then David Hare and Verity [Lambert] asked me to do *Saigon*. And I said I would.
[...]
- KM: Bennett wrote the script first and then built a short story from the script and that was published in the LRB, 'Father, father burning bright ...'
- SF: So, the decision for Alan to be in it was taken after I'd gone.
- KM: Well, I'm not sure. Apparently the reason he didn't want to do it was because of the bedroom scene which he was embarrassed about. But he ended up doing it anyway. He described the problem with the bathroom and the void of the central character-*the writer in disguise* again – so he did this short story because he thought he might have found more substance. He wrote it just before he was filming. You not doing it was obviously a problem. And then Gavin Millar was doing it. Did that affect your personal relationship?
- SF: I was stalinised. But ... Well, it was just that I was there and I'd gone off and that's the sort of ...
- KM: - Betrayal –
- SF: A beautiful relationship wrecked?
- KM: You said something about never having imagined yourself directing in Hollywood...
- SF: Well none of us thought about it. We were having such a good time. We were already more privileged than it was possible to be. All we wanted was to go on. I remember having dinner with Mary-Kay [Wilmers] in Leeds. And there was a man there. Or maybe someone had died. And Mary-Kay implied that, if this was what I thought of as the pinnacle of my life, she would consider that to be pretty poor stuff. Very, very shocked as it seemed to be a wonderful experience. But now I guess she was right.
- KM: Yes, well that's what I took that quote to be that you know you were just not thinking about it [cracking Hollywood] because you were happy where you were.
- SF: No, nobody thought about it. It's really that nowadays everyone wants to go to Hollywood. Then it was inconceivable. And then there are people that say well you always want to be in Hollywood.

- KM: I'm very interested to what you said about making a British film, and that it's going incredibly well but it's still like rolling a rock up a hill. Is it about going back to television or is it just that we should forget about trying to compete?
- SF: In this rather odd way it's that these very independent-minded, clever people were supported by the state and that's what the BBC did. The BBC was full of these sort of 'clubby' old boys and full of these very, very odd British eccentrics. And the one you'd loathe and the other was sort of wonderful. There were some extraordinary journalists. Children were allowed to play. Sandy Kendrick was in the nursery. And you were aloud to play. And in lots of ways it didn't really prepare us for life, for the outside world.
[...]
- SF: I was very successful at the end of the 80s. And when I made *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988), which was a great success. Then I'd made *The Grifters* (1990), before *The Grifters* came out, I'd already agreed to make – or I'd become involved – and they came to me with the script for *Accidental Hero* (1992). I thought it was a wonderful script. And I ... you start going then – you start getting suffocated. But by then I'd agreed to make *Accidental Hero*, and *The Grifters* won the prize for the best independent film of the year.
- KM: Could you imagine working in contemporary television drama, I mean I know you've done some commercials –
- SF: Oh, I've done some. I would happily go back. But [in the 1970s and 1980s] it was futile – it was completely futile what we were doing. I mean we were making films – which were rather good - that were shown only once. It was most nihilistic.
- KM: Why aren't they repeated now?
- SF: What the old ones? Don't they do UK Gold?! They were repeated I remember they were repeated, I remember getting a cheque! Maybe it was expensive to repeat them – I don't know.
- KM: *The Old Crowd* (1979) is obviously a 'special case' – you know, Lindsay Anderson, Alan Bennett and yourself – the odd one out, out of all these television programmes.
- SF: Yes. It was the most wonderful – such fun! It seemed a good idea at the time – and it was terrific. He was a most wonderful man, Lindsay, I'm not sure that he wasn't better than his work, but we are not allowed to say that. He was such an entertaining and interesting man.
- KM: Bennett speaks very positively of this relationship with Anderson.

- SF: Oh, it was wonderful. He was a most wonderful man. It was only – it could only have been a passing experience.
- KM: But putting him somewhere where he didn't go before ...
- SF: Well, that's good. It got absolutely slaughtered.
- KM: Yes, the *South Bank Show* ...
- SF: But we were very, very good. We defended it. I remember Lindsay saying we were brilliant. We just said 'Oh! It was absolutely wonderful, wasn't it?' – Never even questioning, never even contemplating the fact. It's a brilliant tactic. I didn't know it at the time. But I remember Lindsay saying that's the only tactic, "Crisis? - What Crisis? Oh! It was absolutely wonderful"!
- KM: You were more combatant and Bennett was more icy about it – the temperature just dropped and dropped and dropped as Melvin Bragg tried to say, 'Yes, but it was a critical disaster' – "No!" (Imitating Bennett). It was wonderful to watch. But it was seen as Bennett, who's a recognisable voice an old family favourite, working with Anderson was seen as Anderson corrupting Bennett's talent which was interesting.
- SF: He was once offered a contracted Alan to deliver a script and he had some idea to write a pornographic play. There were a lot of old ladies being very, very foul-mouthed. This was a way to get out of his contract because he would deliver a play that was undoable. It always depressed him, that the old ladies liked him so much – that they thought he was such a good boy, and he longed to misbehave.
- KM: Hence, I think this sort of liking of Orton and Larkin, because Orton *did* misbehave and Larkin was rude, and was outspoken, and said and did what he wanted and he was from the more deprived class.
- SF: I was reading Alan [What I did in 2002, *LRB* No. 2, 2003] ... and actually it's very sour and full of him pulling the rug from under some established position.
- KM: Yes, but also feeling the grief that he has not been given the critical recognition. I suppose also by him saying 'I'm not a proper writer ...' which as you said earlier it suits him to say that.
- SF: Yes, but because you're brought up with a sort of modesty – a genuine modesty, not false modesty. With the same sense of knowing your place. I remember it on *A Day Out*. He ran into some bloke who used to write television previews, and this chap said, "Oh, What's this *A Day Out*?" and Alan said, "Oh, it's nothing much".
- KM: Yes. You're taught not to sell yourself, not to be pretentious.

SF: That's right. So all of us are sort of embarrassed by the attention we get – feel rather ashamed of it. While Joe [Orton] couldn't get enough of it. [Laughs].

KM: No, he seemed to be immune to that really.

SF: - he loved it all!

KM: Joe Orton came from the south. But, talking about Leicester – there is no memorials of Joe Orton. We weren't really joking when the new building opened ... and it was suggested that we call it after Orton and Tim O'Sullivan who was head of the department at the time said that the least they could do was name the outside toilets after him [laughs]! He's one of the most famous people to come out of Leicester.

SF: Or, entirely understandable. That's the paradox of England.

KM: Yes. It's feeling warmly about hearing things ... but being embarrassed at the same time. ... It's interesting what you said just now, that some of it because of modesty is taken over by the critics.

SF: *Sunset*, I wouldn't dare watch *Sunset*. I can imagine it's absolutely wonderful. But I wouldn't watch it. Because I would sit there thinking I couldn't do it then and I can't do it now?

KM: The final scene – I've got a neighbour who watches the tape, he's from Yorkshire. We were arguing about the final scene. The woman sitting in the bus shelter – the widow obviously – and

SF: Oh! And the boring woman ... !

KM: Yes. And she's walking along the sea front, rather purposefully striding after she's come back from the hospital. And I think that's rather uplifting and Simon said no, it's just facing isolation. But it didn't seem like that at all. She didn't join the boring woman. She didn't join the widows club.

SF: Anyway I remember the saintliness went to the back!

KM: I remember you saying in a documentary it was almost like he was driven to his death by a nagging wife! [laughs]

SF: Yes. But it wasn't intentionally that was just the nature of the two people.

KM: Bennett does fall between categories, deliberately or not or whatever and that's why critics never get him. And obviously being such a popular playwright and filling every seat in every theatre, and winning ratings wars and the sales for spin-off books – he's just a huge used brand and the critics despise that. At least it seems ...

[Pause]

KM: The problem that I call the 'National Treasure problem' ... [inaudible] ... and it's almost sometimes, I mean, *Lady in the Van* is one of the more formally surprising plays in the last ten years. – you don't see many writers who put themselves on stage

SF: Yes but he did that because it interested him. Because it was a logical answer to a problem. He can think – which is really all it comes down to. But he thought and he wasn't lazy so if confronted by a problem he would think he would have to solve it. ... So there's a sort of implicit siren on his part not to sort of short-change people. – You've come here to see something so I'll show you something.

KM: Yes. Even the annoying people who write to him saying 'tell me what your work means' even they get change because they get these extraordinary detailed introductions – all the detail of the production process, all the sources, all the research process.

SF: And in a way that's all you can talk about. You can never really talk about ... when you make films all you can do is repeat it. When I say 'well the man was wonderful and the woman was rather irritating', there is nothing I can do about it. I could have cast different people, but once you've made that decision it's out of your hands.

KM: Well then you just go by what works and what doesn't, the notes on the page and whether it's good on camera.

SF: You can say, well how interesting, this is what comes across in this bit. Virginia Woolf is both serious and ridiculous at the same time.

KM: Yes. From an academic point-of-view you're always engaged in a certain artificiality because you're looking for patterns were there probably aren't any patterns. I see that because I used to work in the theatre and I know about these things, I know if it doesn't work ...

SF: So he really, he had the capacity to make things eloquent... You make things, sort of get them up to a level were they echo around – resonate.

KM: It's the specificity. People talk about globalisation, globalisation in Bennett land relies on isolation really, people get shut out by trends that affect the whole world but exclude them because they're not specific to that. That's where I look at ??? and

look on that positively, because he keeps insisting – he keeps insisting on that specific microcosm which doesn't work anywhere else. Which is specific to the world that's no longer there.

SF: That's a rather provincial quality that you're describing. In a metropolitan upbringing it's more vague you don't have to deal with specificity. There were so many treats as a child. Things were taken for granted in London ... going to London itself was a treat. So you did learn the value of things

KM: And you did learn what to do to achieve that. [...] So you have to learn what to say in which context. Which is an incredibly narrow area of what you can get away with and what identifies you as an outsider. And I think one of the best things about Bennett's evolution is the fact that he's so stubbornly insisted on portraying what he's good at – which some people find limiting.

SF: Some people do that though, don't they? People ask me why I do so many different things and that's simply because I'm curious or because I get bored doing the same thing. I can see that Alan didn't.

KM: No. He just seems to recycle a lot. He seems to go into more detail. He seems to get more audacious about exposing more detail that he's always known about.

SF: He wrote about something when we were doing *Sunset*. And I can't remember what but I thought, 'I never knew that'.

KM: Nobody did. And it just really opened one's eyes as to the actual – not the one to one connections obviously, this stupid idea that life is art and vice versa – but what was feeding him and what was feeding his writing. Saying that my favourite landscape seems to be in a hospital corridor and where that comes from – you know, the fact that he was visiting his mum

SF: Who was in Lancaster?

KM: She [his mother] was. When they actually moved to Clapham because she couldn't stand the exposure of a small village where people knew her business. She couldn't stand the attention. That's what he writes in *Untold Stories*.

SF: And she died?

KM: In 93. In *The Lady in the Van*, there's this sort of comparison going on between the two – 'at the northern and southern gates of my life ...' – then he gets cross and says I can't even have them share the same sentence. And then the shepherd, of course, accusing him of putting his mother away saying 'are we next ...?' Whether that's a reproduction or construction I don't know. It took such a long time until he actually let on that yes in fact he was portraying people who were very close to

home with mannerisms that were very well-known to him and occurred in his families – not just his aunties but his mum and dad. I think *Intensive Care* is significant, because it's also – it has non-naturalistic elements. You've got dream sequences, very oedipal ... and the fact that the play starts with the times he imagined killing his mother and he wants to be there and fails again. But it's the disapproval of the saintly father that is inflicted on the bland, vacuous and uninteresting son. Which you wouldn't identify Bennett with at all but he kind of does that himself. He says this is one of the *Writer In Disguise* series. And in *Hymn*... there's a huge, big sequence there about his father trying to teach him the violin. His big violin and his little violin. And getting exasperated because he can't do it. Big row between father and son. That kind of thing.
[...]

KM: Finally, you seem to make relationships with writers look incredibly easy and you also seem appreciative of the writers work.

SF: ... He was like a sort of teacher to me Alan, I mean I now realise that. He wrote, the stuff was pouring out and that's how we worked. The [Royal] Court was the writer's theatre and television was the writer's medium those days. So I never learnt otherwise.

KM: The transition seems to be very abrupt, somewhat difficult to manage. The auteurist, television writers medium – the writer is the sort of seething artist.

SF: I haven't transitioned.

KM: No, you haven't but that's how it's looked at. Especially in academia – again about academics being schematic about television.

SF: Well, they're right. You know, in the movies they all turn and look at me and I turn to them and say 'Oh, it's the writer'. ... But no, you're supposed to be ...

KM: Yes, but you've kept the writer at the centre.

SF: They're the ones with the innate wisdom.

KM: Yes but it's not always like that.

SF: No, but that's more to do with the foolishness of other people. In other words I don't understand why it's not always like that. That's not quite true. Eventually, clearly I did start to break away and I became more assertive with writers. When Hanif [Kureishi] appeared I'd say, 'What are you trying to say?' and he'd say, 'Well, so and so' and I'd say 'Well isn't it better to do it like this?' So, some of the respect began to wear off – perhaps some of the over-respect began to wear off. What happened was that the writer's became younger when I think about it. Hanif

[Kureishi] was thirty-three when he came to see me. Somewhere there's a description, maybe in the *Writer In Disguise*, there's a description of me directing ... sort of sitting there like a sort of boy

KM: Doing a crossword

SF: Yes. And I was always this sort of boy who was somehow given the authority. And I think I just sort of grew up because when I made *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) I suddenly realised I was older than everyone. And that this sort of boyishness wasn't going to work anymore. And Alan was so like an older brother and I think I just grew up.

KM: [Quoting Frears]. Casual on-lookers find it difficult to detect the hierarchy of the film unit – who is in charge? It seems to be the camera man who is making them move all the lights anyway, or is one of those two young men who keep changing their minds on where everyone in the audience is supposed to sit. Perhaps it's the man with the long microphone certainly now that he's shake his head they're doing it all again. The proper actors haven't appeared yet –you'd think they'd have some say. Suddenly, everything settle's down and someone shouts out – quite rudely – “Settle everybody, settle” – and the boss turned out to be the scruffy young man who has been sat on the window sill doing the crossword. He scarcely looks old enough. [laughs]

SF: Well that's just perceptive. No, it isn't perceptive really, just descriptive. But it is quite characteristic.
[...]

SF: Alan was self-critical. He would always be the one saying, ‘look, this isn't very good but I can't think of anything better’.

KM: I only know it from stage plays where he's talked about writing and re-writing, where his happiest collaborations were those where he would be part of the rehearsal process.

SF: That's not the same re-writing as I wish Jimmy [McGovern; in *Liam*] had spotted it. That wouldn't have come out of rehearsals.

KM: Yes, it's a different process.

SF: Yes. The actors are such good fun. Inventing with the actors is just a sort of treat and it's really just a sort of game – it's just mucking about. ... And when we did *The Snapper* (1993) Roddy [Doyle] would say, I'd be sitting there in the room surrounded with his type-writer and the book and he'd say ‘Oh you do that bit and you do that bit, oh oh oh’. And, he was rather sort of shocked about it. But, of course it's so joyful and it's so spontaneous and it comes out of such delight at

what's in front of you. Sort of, sort of wanting more and more because it's so wonderful. And it's not shutting your eyes or being indulgent at all. it's nothing to do with that. So, inventing with the actors, mucking about in the corners, and they were always doing that the writers – there was always something going on. And it used to drive me mad! But actually when you get the actors to muck about, you always make a good film. It's when they are being serious you're in trouble. [laughs]. Your heart sinks. When they're fooling around. They're so inventive actors and so generous. I think Alan was very, very touched by their delight in him. [...]

KM: I think people try and pigeon-hole everyone and they obviously try and pigeon-hole you ... [inaudible] ... but the fact that you say you enjoy immersing yourself in the work of a writer and that you enjoy immersing yourself in the characters that the writer has written – I think that's the key to your successful collaboration.

SF: It seems to be. Or it's what I do. I get immense pleasure from it and I don't feel threatened by it at all.

KM: And I think that's one of the unusual things.

SF: Is that right? It's happened with seven or eight people.

KM: But what you do as a production dramaturg in the theatre, you keep the writer and director apart because otherwise ... It's about control, it's power, it's you're not in charge now, I am.

SF: People always say at me, well it's all la ha ha, you know, lovey-dovey and larking about, but you clearly know everything that's going on.

KM: Yes that's fine. But you've said you don't feel threatened whereas the director in the theatre normally does. It's a sort of reputation that writers tend to have in theatre that their presence is not helpful. That's why Bennett speaks of his collaborations with such pleasure because they were different. He could actually be a useful part of the rehearsal. That's very unusual.

11.3) “I Remember, I Remember” –

Thomas Hood and Philip Larkin

I Remember, I Remember

I remember, I remember,
The house where I was born,
The little window where the sun
Came peeping in at morn;
He never came a wink too soon,
Nor brought too long a day,
But now, I often wish the night
Had borne my breath away!

I remember, I remember,
The roses, red and white,
The violets, and the lily-cups,
Those flowers made of light!
The lilacs where the robin built,
And where my brother set
The laburnum on his birthday,--
The tree is living yet!

I remember, I remember,
Where I was used to swing,
And thought the air must rush as fresh
To swallows on the wing;
My spirit flew in feathers then,
That is so heavy now,
And summer pools could hardly cool
The fever on my brow!

I remember, I remember,
The fir trees dark and high;
I used to think their slender tops
Were close against the sky:
It was a childish ignorance,
But now 'tis little joy
To know I'm farther off from heav'n
Than when I was a boy.

Thomas Hood (1826)

'I Remember, I Remember'

Coming up England by a different line
For once, early in the cold new year,
We stopped, and, watching men with number plates
Sprint down the platform to familiar gates,
'Why, Coventry!' I exclaimed. 'I was born here.'

I leant far out, and squinnied for a sign
That this was still the town that had been 'mine'
So long, but found I wasn't even clear
Which side was which. From where those cycle-crates
Were standing, had we annually departed

For all those family hols? . . . A whistle went:
Things moved. I sat back, staring at my boots.
'Was that,' my friend smiled, 'where you "have your roots"?'
No, only where my childhood was unspent,
I wanted to retort, just where I started:

By now I've got the whole place clearly charted.
Our garden, first: where I did not invent
Blinding theologies of flowers and fruits,
And wasn't spoken to by an old hat.
And here we have that splendid family

I never ran to when I got depressed,
The boys all biceps and the girls all chest,
Their comic Ford, their farm where I could be
'Really myself'. I'll show you, come to that,
The bracken where I never trembling sat,

Determined to go through with it; where she
Lay back, and 'all became a burning mist'.
And, in those offices, my doggerel
Was not set up in blunt ten-point, nor read
By a distinguished cousin of the mayor,

Who didn't call and tell my father There
Before us, had we the gift to see ahead -
'You look as though you wished the place in Hell,'
My friend said, 'judging from your face.' 'Oh well,
I suppose it's not the place's fault,' I said.

'Nothing, like something, happens anywhere.'

Philip Larkin